JAMES C. SCOTT

Weapons of the Weak
Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance
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This is, exactly, not to argue that "morality" is some "autonomous region" of human choice and will, arising independently of the historical process. Such a view of morality has never been materialist enough, and hence it has often reduced that formidable inertia—and sometimes formidable revolutionary force—into a wishful idealist fiction. It is to say, on the contrary, that every contradiction is a conflict of value as well as a conflict of interest; that inside every "need" there is an affect, or "want," on its way to becoming an "ought" (and vice versa); that every class struggle is at the same time a struggle over values.

E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*

RAZAK

The narrow path that serves as the thoroughfare of this small rice-farming village was busier than usual that morning. Groups of women were on their way to transplant the irrigated crop and men were bicycling their children to the early session of school in the nearby town of Kepala Batas. My children were all gathered, as usual, at the windows to watch as each passerby gazed our way from the moment the house came into view until it passed from view. This scene had become, in the space of a few weeks, a daily ritual. The villagers of Sedaka were satisfying their curiosity about the strange family in their midst. My children, on the other hand, were satisfying a more malevolent curiosity. They had come to resent mildly their status of goldfish in a bowl and were convinced that sooner or later someone would forget himself while craning his neck and walk or bicycle straight into the ditch alongside the path. The comic possibility had caught their imagination and, when it inevitably happened, they wanted to be there.

But something was amiss. A small, quiet knot of people had formed in front of the house next door and some passersby had paused to talk with them. Hamzah and his older brother, Razak, were there, as was Razak's wife, Azizah, and the village midwife, Tok Sah Bidan. The tone was too subdued and grave to be casual and Azizah, along with other women from poor families, would normally have already left for work with her transplanting group. Before I could

1. A list of dramatis personae for this study, together with a map of the village and its environs, may be found in chapter 4.
leave the house, Haji Kadir, the well-to-do landlord with whose family we shared
the house, walked in and told me what had happened. "Razak's little child is
dead, the one born two seasons ago." "It's her fate; her luck wasn't good." 2

The details were straightforward. Two days ago the child had come down
with a fever. It was the end of the dry season in Kedah when fevers are expected,
but this seemed to be more than the ordinary fever, perhaps measles, someone
suggested. Yesterday she had been taken to Lebai Sabrani, a highly venerated
religious teacher and traditional healer in the adjoining village of Sungai Tong-
kang. He recited verses of the Koran over her and suggested a poultice for her
forehead. I am implicated in this too, Razak told me later. Had I not been
visiting another village, he would have asked me to drive the child to a clinic
or to the hospital in the state capital, Alor Setar. As it was, he did ask Shamsul,
the only other automobile owner in the village, and was told that it would cost
M$15 for gas. Razak did not have any money or, I suspect, enough confidence
in hospitals to press the matter, and his daughter died shortly before dawn the
next day.

Instinctively, I started for Razak's place, behind Hamzah's house, where the
body would customarily be on view. Razak stopped me and said, "No, not there.
We put her in Hamzah's house; it's nicer here." His embarrassment was evident
from the way he avoided meeting my eyes.

Razak is the "down-and-out" 3 of the village, and his house was not only an
embarrassment to him; it was a collective humiliation for much of Sedaka. When
I had arrived in the village, Razak and his family were living under the house,
not in it. Two walls of attap4 and bamboo had fallen away and much of the
roof had collapsed. "They live like chickens in a henhouse, a lean-to, not like
Malays," villagers said with derision. Not long after that, the local leader of the
ruling party, Basir, mindful of the fact that Razak had joined his party and
embarrassed that any Malays in his village should live on the ground like the
beasts of the field, got the subdistrict chief to provide a modest sum from his
discretionary funds for lumber to repair the house. A small voluntary work party,
all members of the ruling party, then repaired three walls, leaving the last wall
and the roof for Razak to finish. After all, Razak and Azizah made attap roofing
for a living. The roof remains as it was, however, and the boards to repair the
last wall are gone. Razak sold them twice—once to Rokiah and once to Kamil,

2. Habuan dia, nasib tak baik. Here and elsewhere in the text, when it seems
important or where reasonable people might differ on the translation, I have included
the original Malay in the footnotes. A brief glossary of local Kedah dialect terms
that may be unfamiliar to speakers of standard, urban Malay is also provided in
appendix D.


4. Long, rectangular "shingles" stitched together from the stems and leaves of
the nipah palm, which constitute the roofs and occasionally the walls of poor houses.
but only Kamil got the lumber; Rokiah calls Razak an "old liar" and says he would sell his own children. She swears she will never buy anything from him again unless she takes delivery first.

As we mounted the ladder to Hamzah's house, I realized that this was the first time I had actually entered his family's one-room living and sleeping quarters. I never did enter Razak's house or the houses of six of the other poorest families in the village. They chose instead always to receive me outside, where we squatted or sat on simple benches. We remained outside because they were embarrassed about the condition of their houses and because actually entering the house would imply a level of hospitality (coffee, biscuits) that would strain their meager resources. When possible, I made an effort to meet on neutral grounds—in the rice fields, on the path—or perhaps in one of the two small shops in the village or at the twice-weekly nearby market, where I could legitimately play host. For the rich people of the village the problem never arose; they never went to the homes of the poor. Visiting, except between equals, was always done up the status ladder in the village, and particularly so during the ritual visits following the end of the Moslem fasting month. In fact, the pattern of visits served to define the village status hierarchy. This pattern was broken significantly only in the case of grave illness or death in a poor household, when the normal rules of hospitality were suspended out of respect for a more universal human drama.

Thus it was that the death of Maznah (Razak's daughter) had opened Hamzah's house to me and to many others. She was lying on a tiny mattress surrounded by mosquito netting strung from the rafters. Her body was wrapped in a new white cloth, and her face was barely visible beneath a lace shawl of the kind women wear for prayer. Beside the netting was incense and a tin plate. Each new visitor would, after lifting the netting to look at the child, place money on the plate: as little as 50¢, or as much as M$2. The contributions to funeral expenses, known as "lightening" or "instant donations," were especially necessary in this case since neither Razak nor many of the other very poor villagers subscribed to a death benefit society that "insures" for funeral expenses. The money on the plate at the end of the day would provide for at least the minimal decencies.

There were perhaps twenty-five villagers, mostly women, sitting on the floor of the bare room talking quietly in small groups. A few men remained to talk among themselves, but most left quickly to join the other men outside. Razak, sitting by the door, was ignored, but his isolation was not a collective act of respect for his private grief. At feasts, at other funerals, at the village shops, and even at market stalls, the other men always sat somewhat apart from Razak. He did not intrude himself. His daughter's death was no exception; the men

5. Called Hari Raya Puasa or simply Hari Raya.
who left shuffled around him as if he were a piece of furniture. On the rare occasions when he was addressed, the tone was unmistakable. A group of men sitting in one of the village stores having ice drinks and smoking would hail his arrival with “Here comes Tun Razak” followed by knowing smiles all around. “Tun Razak” was the aristocratic title of Malaysia’s second prime minister, and its application to this ragtag, frail, obsequious village outcast was intended to put him in his place. Whoever was treating that day would pay for his drink, and Razak would help himself to the tobacco and cut nipah leaves used to make peasant cigarettes. He was extended the minimal courtesies but otherwise ignored, just as today the village was burying his daughter but he himself might as well have been invisible.

Directly across the path, outside the combination village hall, religious school (madrasah), and prayer house, a few young men had begun measuring the spare boards they had rounded up for a coffin. Yaakub thought the boards were far too long and Daud, the son of the village headman, was sent back to Hamzah’s house with string to measure. Meanwhile Basir arrived with hot tea and the special canvas used for the bottom of the casket. The talk turned, as it often did in the coffee shops, to an exchange of stories about Razak’s many capers, most of which were established staples of village gossip. Amin shared the most recent installment having to do with the subsidies given by the government for house improvement and permanent outdoor toilets. Razak, along with other members of the ruling party—and only them—was the recipient of a porcelain toilet bowl. Despite explicit warnings against selling such material, Razak had exchanged his for Amin’s plastic bowl and cash and in turn sold the plastic toilet to Nor for M$15. Yaakub, to the general merriment, asked why Razak should build a toilet anyway, when he did not even have a house.

Yaakub then wondered whether anyone else had seen Razak dig into the curry at the wedding feast for Rokiah’s daughter two days before, a feast to which he had not been invited. Shahnon added that only yesterday, when Razak turned up at the coffee stall in the town market, he invited him to have some coffee, it being understood that Shahnon would pay. The next thing he noticed, Razak had left after having not only drunk coffee but taken three cakes and two cigarettes. Others recalled, partly for my benefit, how Razak took payment for

7. The two-story building built with government help some fifteen years ago is generally referred to as the madrasah, since the ground floor is used regularly for religious classes as well as for village meetings. The upper floor is used exclusively as a prayer house (surau), especially during the fasting month. See in photo section following p. 162.

8. Called the Ranchangan Pemulihan Kampung (Village Improvement Scheme), the program made grants available to selected villages throughout the country. In this village, the assistance was distributed along strictly partisan lines. An account of this episode may be found in chapter 6.

9. Apa pasal bikin jamban, rumah pun tak ada.
attap roofing from Kamil and never delivered it and how Kamil gave him cash for special paddy seed that Razak said he could get from a friend in a nearby village. Accosted a week later, he claimed his friend with the seed had not been at home. Accosted again the following week, he claimed his friend had already sold the seed. The money was never returned. On various occasions, they claimed, Razak had begged seed paddy for planting or rice for his family. In each case, the gift had been sold for cash, not planted or eaten. Ghazali accused him of helping himself to nipah fronds from behind his house for roofing without ever asking permission and of having begged for a religious gift of paddy (zakat) even before the harvest was in. "I lost my temper," he added as many shook their heads.

When the well-to-do villagers lament, as they increasingly do, the growing laziness and independence of those they hire for work in the fields, the example of Razak is always close at hand. They have other illustrations, but Razak is by far the most serviceable. Any number of times, they claim, he has taken advance wages in cash or rice and then failed to show up for work. As for his poverty, they are skeptical. He has, after all, half a relong (.35 acre), which he rents out like a landlord rather than farming himself. The general verdict is that he is simply not capable of getting ahead. When the subdistrict chief (penghulu), Abdul Majid, confides to me that the poor are reluctant to work anymore and now insist on unrealistic wages, he seizes the example of Razak. "He has made himself hard up, it's his own doing." When the well-to-do villagers lament, as they increasingly do, the growing laziness and independence of those they hire for work in the fields, the example of Razak is always close at hand. They have other illustrations, but Razak is by far the most serviceable. Any number of times, they claim, he has taken advance wages in cash or rice and then failed to show up for work. As for his poverty, they are skeptical. He has, after all, half a relong (.35 acre), which he rents out like a landlord rather than farming himself. The general verdict is that he is simply not capable of getting ahead. When the subdistrict chief (penghulu), Abdul Majid, confides to me that the poor are reluctant to work anymore and now insist on unrealistic wages, he seizes the example of Razak. "He has made himself hard up, it's his own doing."

By now the simple coffin was nearly finished and Amin, the best carpenter in the village, began to add some small decorative touches at the ends. "No need to add decorations," put in Ariffin, and Amin left off. As they carried the coffin across to Hamzah's house, where Maznah lay, someone sized up the work and said, "shabby."

Returning to my house I encountered a small group of Pak Haji Kadir's wife's friends talking about the child's death. They all seemed to agree that Razak and Azizah were largely to blame. After all, they took their sick daughter to Rokiah's feast the day before yesterday, fed her food she should not have had, and kept her up to all hours. "They don't eat at all well," said Tok Kasim's 10. Razak claims, with some justice, that he is too weak and ill to cultivate and that, in any case, he does not have the money for tractor charges, fertilizer, or seed.

11. Tak pandai pusing. The implication of this phrase is that Razak does not take pains, does not hustle.

12. Dia bllat susah. Abdul Majid went on to describe many local Chinese families who had begun with nothing and were now rich. One might possibly translate this phrase as: "He is pretending to be hard up," since the verb for "shamming" (membuat-buat) is occasionally abbreviated.

13. Lekeb. This word in Kedah carries the meaning of "vulgar, common, shabby, not refined," and is much like the use of kasar in standard Malay. It is variously applied to people, feasts, commodities, music, cloth, personal behavior, and so forth.
wife, "they have to tag along at other people's feasts." At my urging, the details of the family's scant cuisine emerged. For breakfast, if there was any money in the house, coffee and perhaps cassava or a bit of cold rice left over from the day before. Otherwise, only water. And Razak's family, someone added, drank water from the same ditch used for bathing. Rarely any porridge, never any milk, and almost never any sugar unless Azizah brought some back from her relatives in Dulang. By contrast, the village headman, Haji Jaafar, usually took his morning meal in the town coffee shop, where he had porridge or fried flat bread with sugar or curry, assorted cakes and sweets made with sticky rice, and coffee with sweetened condensed milk. The midday meal, the main one in the village, for Razak's family would typically include rice, vegetables that could be gathered free in the village, and, if finances permitted, some dried fish or the cheapest fish from the market. No one had ever seen Razak buy vegetables. Fresh fish, when they had it, was normally cooked over an open fire, for it was rare that they could afford the 30¢ minimum purchase of the cheapest cooking oil. Haji Jaafar's midday meal, on the other hand, reflected both his wealth and his rather sumptuous tastes: a tasty curry made from the most expensive fish and market vegetables and, at least twice a week, a luxury that Razak never bought—meat.

Razak's household, like its food, was distinguished less by what it had than by what it lacked. The couple had no mosquito netting, which helped explain why their children's arms and legs were often covered with the scabs of old bites. Maybe once a year they bought a bar of the cheapest soap. They had to share three tin plates and two cups when they ate. They lacked even the traditional mats to sleep on, using instead an old cast-off plastic sheet Razak found at the market. As for clothes, Azizah had not bought a sarong since her wedding, making do instead with worn-out cloth given her by Basir's wife. Razak's one pair of pants and shirt were bought three years ago when there was a sale of secondhand clothing that had not been redeemed at the pawnbrokers. As Cik Puteh pointed out, the responsibility for this deplorable situation rested squarely with Razak. "He has land but he doesn't want to plant it." "He's always looking for short cuts." "He takes the money first but doesn't want to come thresh paddy." "Now, those who are hard up are getting cleverer; there's more cheating these days."


15. The generic term for such vegetables, which can be eaten raw with rice, is *ulam.* Some of the locally available *ulam* include *kangkong, daun cetnak, daun pegaga,* *bebuas,* *daun putat,* and the banana *spadix.* Both Razak and his wife would also occasionally catch rice-paddy fish with line and hook. Since the beginning of double-cropping and the increased use of pesticides, however, such fish have become less plentiful and may in fact have serious long-run health consequences for the poor who continue to eat them.

The sound of motorcycle engines next door told us that the body had been prepared for burial and the funeral procession was about to begin. Normally, in the case of an adult, the coffin would have been carried the two miles to the mosque with a cortege of men following on foot, on bicycle, and on motorcycle. Since Maznah was so small and light, Hamzah, her uncle, carried her wrapped in a new batik cloth slung over his shoulder like a bandolier as he rode pillion behind Basir on his Honda 70. The plain coffin was carried athwart Amin’s motorcycle by Ghani Lebai Mat. Counting Razak and myself, there were only eleven men, and it was the first entirely motorcycle-born cortege I had ever seen. The villagers and later the Chinese shopkeepers in Kepala Batas paused briefly to watch us pass.

On arrival at the mosque most of the men then entered the mosque to pray for Maznah’s soul. The prayers led by Lebai Sabrani, took less than ten minutes and it was over. When they emerged, Basir handed them envelopes containing a dollar, as is the custom. The six men who had prayed returned the envelopes. Villagers believe that these prayers help lighten the burden of sin and speed the soul on its way to heaven; the more who pray, the more rapid the soul’s progress. In the graveyard next to the mosque, Tok Siak (caretaker of the mosque) and his assistant were still digging the grave. Maznah, covered with a cotton winding sheet, was taken gently from the batik cloth and placed in the coffin on her side so that she would be facing Kiblat. A large clod of clay from the grave was lodged against her back to prevent her position from shifting. Tok Siak was now bailing water from the grave with an old biscuit tin; the burial plot was on reclaimed paddy land and the seasonal rains had begun. On the way back to the village, I asked Amin why there were so few people at the burial. He replied that, since Maznah was so young, her sins were few, and thus it was not so important that many people pray on her behalf. But it was a sensitive question, for we both remembered the burial of Tok Sah’s infant granddaughter a month earlier when two of three times that number had come to the graveyard.

That night, again at Hamzah’s house, there was a small funeral feast.18 Not more than fifteen men came, and Haji Kadir led the brief Islamic prayers and chants. The expenses, for coffee, flat bread with sugar, and the makings of

17. These prayers after burial are called Doa Talqin, and the gift to those who pray varies, depending on the status of the deceased. This traditional practice is under attack by Islamic fundamentalists, who wish to purify Malay religious practice by banning pre-Islamic practices. In the adjacent state of Perlis, Doa Talqin are officially forbidden.

18. Kenduri arwah are normally celebrated on the first, second, third, seventh, fourteenth, fortieth, and hundredth days after a death in the family. Kenduri arwah may be celebrated at other times as well (often after harvest) and are sometimes combined with feasts of thanksgiving as well. The kenduri, much like the selametan in Indonesia, is clearly a traditional practice of the muslim.
peasant cigarettes came to less than M$12 and were partly defrayed by minute donations of coins. Razak, as usual, was ignored, invisible. Later, as Yaakub and I walked back home along the village path, he asked if I had noticed how the tobacco had run short because Razak had pocketed some for later use. "Shabby," was his summary.

Early in the morning, three or four days later, Razak appeared at the foot of my steps waiting to be asked up. Whenever he came to see me it was always early enough so that no one else was about; if someone else did happen by, he would fall silent and take the first opportunity to leave. Despite the fact that the gossip about him had long aroused my curiosity, I had already found myself avoiding much talk with him in public, having sensed that it could only set village tongues wagging. Was he taking advantage of me? What tales and slanders would he put in my ear? Did I actually approve of this good-for-nothing?

Razak had come to thank me for my large contribution to the funeral expenses. I had made a discreet donation directly into Razak's hands the day his daughter died, knowing that if I had put M$20 directly on the plate near the body, I would have received no end of scolding. 19

Before long we passed on to the topic I had been raising recently in conversations with villagers: the enormous changes that have come to Sedaka since the beginning of double-cropping eight years ago. It was clear to Razak that things were generally worse now than before irrigation. "Before it was easy to get work, now there's no work in the village and the estates (rubber and oil palm) don't want anyone." "The poor are poorer and the rich are richer." 20 The trouble, he added, is mostly because of the combine-harvesters that now cut and thresh paddy in a single operation. Before, his wife could earn over M$200 a season cutting paddy and he could earn M$150 threshing, but this last season they only managed M$150 between them. 21 "People weren't happy when the ma-