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DISCUSSION PAPER NO. 99

INDONESIANS AT WORK THROUGH JAPANESE EYES

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Yoshihiro TSUBOUCHI

March, 1978

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The Center for Southeast Asian Studies

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This is an interim report on a survey of "Interpersonal relationships among urban people of Indonesia," which I conducted in Jakarta over a period of about one year in 1975/76.<sup>1)</sup> The survey, of which Indonesian-Japanese interpersonal relationships forms but one part, is yet incomplete; but rather than delay publication of the results so far obtained I here report part of the data furnished by Japanese informants.<sup>2)</sup> Raw material was collected in interviews lasting from one to three hours with fifty-seven Japanese men who had been sent by their companies to work in Indonesia. The informants held positions ranging from president to field supervisor and ranged in age from twenties to fifties. Residence periods in Indonesia varied from a few months up to seven or eight years. For many of the informants this was their first experience of living abroad, though a few had lived in other countries. Indonesians with whom they came into contact ranged from upper class white-collar workers to factory hands. Many were Javanese or Sundanese, a reflection of the location of Jakarta, though others were Indonesians from the outer islands and Chinese. The informants all held supervisory positions vis-a-vis the local staff and workers, and the majority of them were employees of large corporations on temporary transfer abroad.

This report describes the attitudes to work and working habits of the Indonesians as seen through the eyes of the Japanese. The informants' impressions of the Indonesians were far from uniform, and their own attitudes also varied considerably: some expressed the

official stance, others private opinions; some were neutral, others sympathetic; some were internationalist in outlook, others Japanese. In view of this diversity, I have taken the following steps in analyzing and presenting the results of the interviews: (1) tape-recorded interviews were transcribed in toto; (2) the content of statements was reduced to the smallest unit; (3) related statements were grouped together; (4) representative statements are presented for each grouping; and (5) statements are presented as far as possible in the informants' own words. The names and organizations of the informants are not reported, nor is any information which might offer a clue to their identity.

#### I. Job Performance

While their appraisals of the same activity differed according to their expectations, the supervisors generally spoke highly of their Indonesian employees' ability to perform simple jobs. The general evaluation was that they "will persevere with simple jobs" and "are good at simple repetition." For example, "if I tell them to cut a big iron bar they'll do it even if it takes half a day." In the estimation of some of the informants the Indonesians compared favorably with their Japanese counterparts. "Japanese youngsters set their sights on a stylish job in which they won't get tired or dirty, whereas the Indonesians will do even a monotonous job wholeheartedly." "Japanese are too ready to compromise with their principles and bend the rules." Manual dexterity was also highly evaluated: the following



comments pertain to spinning factory workers. "I was surprised that they learnt to twist the cotton threads together as quickly as Japanese workers." "They are about twenty percent more dextrous than Japanese workers in setting up the thread on the machines." Some informants also commented on the high quality of office employees. "Office workers are even better than in developed countries--the United States, for example."

Nevertheless, patience and efficiency do not always go hand in hand, and for more complex work or work requiring stamina a greater number of informants indicated some problems. "They have no physical stamina and tire easily," and "can't concentrate on their work for a long period;" in sum, "they are patient but work slowly." Despite their manual dexterity in isolated tasks, the Indonesians are reportedly "poor at performing a connected series of tasks." They were also said to be "good at simple repetition, but unable to deal with trouble. When problems arise they have no idea what to do." The arithmetical incompetence of office workers was also criticized frequently: "In work involving figures they are far below Japanese middle-school students;" "they just work mechanically and never check their results." One informant criticized performance in the office: "They are extremely inefficient; they often rewrite or retype things time and time again."

Numerous other problems were cited regarding the Indonesians' conception of a particular task as one part of the whole operation. First, informants stated that their workers failed to confirm and report back results. "They don't reiterate orders." "They leave something they've been ordered to do to someone else and don't

check that it's been done." "They never report results." As a result, in one case "a Japanese supervisor was himself doing confirmation work, which would not be necessary in Japan." However, one informant reported that "at first they never sent in reports, but recently they have not failed to do so."

The second problem mentioned was a lack of planning ability. "They never use their heads and take steps to finish a job quickly." "Even the factory manager (an Indonesian) has not acquired the habit of keeping records and making use of them." "They have not grasped what is important in collecting and filing data, and consequently prepare useless materials." "Suddenly someone will turn up saying that he's stopped his machine because he's run out of the chemicals he needs."

The third complaint was that workers are inflexible. "They're only concerned with their own assignment; they're not flexible." Indonesians are seen to be the "opposite of the Japanese, who prefer an overall scope to individual assignments." The following comments were in the same vein: "They seldom exercise any judgement in working." "Even if they have time they don't do extra work." "They stick to their own province and don't like to help out with other work." "It's hard to get them to switch jobs." One trivial but daily occurrent aspect of this phenomenon which was mentioned frequently was that Indonesians are "very status-conscious and won't do their cleaning themselves." However, a minority of informants thought that their employees would "help out even if the job has nothing to do with them."

Fourth was the problem of transmitting information. "They file

away circulars and nobody else gets to know." "Even if you talk to the representatives all the workers don't get to hear." One informant reported: "Even though verbal communication would suffice they write everything down," although conversely another stated: "If I draw someone's attention to an error in something I've informed him of verbally he'll say he hasn't heard about it."

At a higher level, the informants indicated a lack of understanding on the part of the Indonesians about the company as an organization. "The company is an organization that all Japanese understand, but here the company is not understood." "Since they don't understand the full picture they only consider their own part of the job, and the overall efficiency is very low." "They are unable to make use of the organization in their work." In consequence, "when an order comes from above they'll obey it even if it means abandoning the job on hand;" and "they ask for permission to do something against the regulations, since they don't consider it wrong providing the supervisor gives the OK." The following observations also related to company regulations: "The regulations can easily be broken;" "some workers sleep on the night shift;" "when we employ girls they turn up to work in hot pants;" and "in the factory office they sometimes work in high heels and the like."

One exceptional informant stated that "the efficiency of the factory is higher than in Japan." Probably more expressive of the feelings of the majority is the comment: "In Japan I heard that



against a rating of one for a Japanese, Taiwanese and Koreans would rate as half, and Indonesians half of that again. In fact it's not that bad. The quality of workers in Japan is declining at present." The comparatively high assessments of efficiency were seventy or eighty percent of that in Japan; the harshest estimate was thirty percent. In many cases, "several workers are assigned to one machine, which means that while the output of the machine is maintained the productivity per worker is low." Other informants reported: "I handle the work of two Japanese with a group of five;" and "I use thirty, if not fifty, more hands to do what I could with a hundred workers in Japan." However, one informant had noted a gradual increase in efficiency: "Previously it was about forty percent of the level in Japan; now it's about fifty percent." Another considered that "in the plant efficiency can be raised through training, but in the administrative section it will take a considerable time to reach the level of Japan." In general affairs, in particular, which require the ability to make a comprehensive judgement, difficulties were often encountered.

## II. Will to work

### 1. Attitudes to work

"My fellow front-line Japanese supervisors were surprised to find Indonesians who wanted quickly to become fully qualified workers. Before coming here they had heard only three reports: 'Indonesians don't like to work,' 'they dislike standing and soon

sit down,' and 'when you tell them to do something they carry on until you tell them to stop.' But they have been highly impressed by the Indonesians' positive attitudes to work. In Japan a middle- or high-school graduate is a golden egg; but in Indonesia such a person is grateful to get a job. The Indonesians' attitude on starting a job is different: they're very positive and want to learn the job and establish their position quickly; they'll even turn their hands to things they know nothing about."

This statement was exceptional, however. Most of the Japanese supervisors were dissatisfied with their Indonesian employees, because "although they'll do what they've been assigned they won't venture beyond that." The following shortcomings were also pointed out: "If they're ordered to do something they will, but they won't take the initiative." "They define their own area of work too finely." "When trouble occurs they come and ask what steps to take. They never say 'I think we should do such-and-such, how about it?'" "They never create work on their own." "One can't expect them to work out the details of their jobs for themselves, like people do in Japan. They dawdle through their work following a method someone has thought up for them." "They don't consider it their job to think about what improvements could be made." "It bothers me that they don't have opinions of their own." "There are very few positive and constructive opinions or proposals put forward." "They seldom advance their own opinions." "They have absolutely no competitive spirit." "A Japanese would continually be thinking of his own

future and how to make it a success, but here there are very few who try to learn the job and make the most they can of their future."

Japanese tend to value personal enterprise and feel something lacking in the obedience of the Indonesians. For example, one interviewee thought that "if anything it is a failing that the Indonesians don't complain about trivial matters or say they don't like things." Another felt it "spiritless that even a capable graduate of Gajah Mada University should tamely follow the Japanese interpretation of Indonesian labor laws." One informant stated that "while an Indonesian supervisor wants subordinates who are obedient even if they can't do the job, a Japanese would prefer someone who was spirited and capable." There were, however, a few accounts of disobedience among workers. For example: "When we introduced a new system they said they didn't like it, even though they understood the reasons for it." "Although they have been taught and say they understand a certain way of doing something, they pretend not to know and do it in an Indonesian way — for example, mixing up personal and company matters."

The supervisors were also asked about their employees' sense of responsibility. The following responses are typical: "It's easy to tell those who have a sense of responsibility and those who don't. Generally very few do." "Generally they lack much sense of responsibility, though some feel their responsibility strongly." A minority of informants felt their employees "no different from the Japanese." And replies were mixed concerning



the managerial class: "Graduates of the academies (junior colleges) and above have a sense of responsibility, but middle-school and elementary-school graduates rarely do." "The assistant manager class do have a sense of responsibility, but I would hardly call it strong." "Foremen are not aware that they are responsible for a project."

Many of the informants indicated that the Indonesians felt responsibility in a different way. "I can't say outright that they have no sense of responsibility at all. They do their utmost, but don't feel responsible for the results like a Japanese would." "They don't feel responsible as a matter of conscience." "As long as the supervisor says something's OK it's OK. But that's not really feeling responsible for a job. I was once asked who I was responsible to!" "If I ask a Japanese to do something at his own discretion he will do it, whereas with Indonesians, like Westerners, one can't expect this." One self-conscious interviewee stated: "By Japanese standards they have no sense of responsibility at all. But then, the Japanese have too great a sense of responsibility."

The following are a few of the instances in which the supervisors felt their employees to lack a sense of responsibility. "One Indonesian manager said that he gave instructions but that the matter went no further through the fault of his underlings." "When there was a typing error in a slip the Indonesian in charge pleaded ignorance and layed the blame on the girl who typed it." "When I asked the day manager of our three shifts to investigate

the cause of a failure on the night shift so that the same thing wouldn't happen again, he said it was the business of the night shift and nothing to do with him." "When a box of merchandise was stolen the director of general affairs blamed the company for not having a warehouse. Although we employ thirty guards he had never even checked the guard system." "Even when there's been a mistake in their own area of responsibility they won't admit it." "If I point out a mistake they say they don't know. There's no way round 'tidak tau' [I don't know]." "They seldom help each other. If they make a slip while helping someone else they will be held responsible, so they limit their own responsibility." "They don't like to stay over to finish a job. Even if I tell them I want them to do the job today, they answer they haven't the time today." "If I give a Japanese a job he will carry it through to the end, but here they all go home at 4 o'clock. Even when the production line would have to be stopped the next day through their not cleaning up today's work, they don't care."

There were a few cases reported of workers who had developed a sense of responsibility through working with Japanese. One informant stated that "they change considerably in a year;" and another observed: "At first they tended to leave as soon as working hours were over, but lately if they think there are things they should do they stay over from 4 o'clock till about 6 o'clock."

## 2. Attendance

Many of the informants made statements to the effect that "absenteeism is generally low; the attendance rate is higher than in Japanese companies." Below is a number of examples pertaining to factories, cited in abbreviated form.

- (1) The attendance rate is extremely good: about ninety-eight percent in the weaving sector. Directly after pay day this drops to about ninety percent. To encourage attendance we offer bonuses for perfect attendance and regular attendance. (Textile industry)
- (2) Exclusive of paid holidays the attendance rate is 97.5 percent; inclusive of them it's still 97.4 percent. (Textile industry)
- (3) The attendance rate is ninety-seven percent, better than in other sections of the company. In Japan it's about ninety-four percent. (Textile industry)
- (4) The attendance rate is around ninety-five percent. In Japan it's ninety-two to ninety-three percent of late. Reasons for absence include sickness and childbirth. (Electrical industry)
- (5) The attendance rate is about ninety-two percent, better than I'd imagined it would be before I came. It drops to about eighty-five percent directly after pay day. (Textile industry)
- (6) Recent data showed the average attendance for men and women to be about ninety-one percent. There's a gap of about five percent between men and women: for men the rate is 94.8 percent and for women 89.9 percent. (Textile industry)
- (7) The attendance rate tops ninety percent. On the day after pay



day it's eighty-seven to eighty-eight percent. They don't like to work when they have money. The attendance rate has gone up since we've been making efforts in that direction, but if we let things ride it would drop. When the fast ended (Lebaran) we recorded sixty percent. (Textile industry)

(8) The attendance rate is about ninety percent. Since we employ a lot of women absenteeism is high. There's also maternity leave. Absenteeism is a headache. When the attendance rate is down the line can't run at full speed and efficiency falls. (Electrical industry)

Although there were slight variations depending on the type and location of the industry, the sex ratio of the employees, and the management system, the attendance rates in most concerns, in addition to those just cited, were maintained above ninety percent. Clerical sections also reported generally high attendance rates. One informant, not cited in the foregoing examples, noted that the system of payment in his factory greatly affected the attendance rate. "Two years ago when we switched from monthly to daily payment the attendance rate jumped from eighty-odd percent to ninety-eight percent." Another noteworthy occurrence in the factories is that "the attendance rate drops on the two days after pay day." A deterioration in attendance during and directly after the fasting month was also noted, but this I will treat in more detail when I deal with religion.

Despite the comparatively good attendance, the diligent

Japanese sometimes view as irresponsible those Indonesians who consider it "natural to stay off work and recover when they feel unwell," and think that "in Japan one's wife's or brother's or sister's being ill would not be sufficient reason to stay off work." Most companies grant about twelve days of paid holidays annually, and workers show "a general tendency to take the days off as a right." With a few exceptions, the workers "tend to try and make sure that they take all their days off." Also noted was "a tendency to pay little attention to timing." "They use their annual holidays for recreation, not to make up for days lost through sickness. They are basically different from the Japanese, who save up their holidays in case they become sick." There was also a case of "a worker using all his paid leave for his own recreation without any forethought, and then staying off work without notice for his own wedding."

Most informants agreed that "there isn't much lateness." Because of the unreliability of the transport facilities, many companies send buses to collect their workers. One company in Jakarta "tolerates lateness of up to ten or fifteen minutes, because of the traffic conditions." Particularly during heavy rain the buses are sometimes late or don't arrive at all. The traffic situation is also reflected in the following statement: "Our office is in Jakarta, and although work starts at half past eight half of the staff come from half past seven." Leaving early is less common than lateness, but there are examples: "Some of the

workers go home before work is over. This is hard to control."  
"They get ready to go home before leaving time." "They're waiting  
at the factory exit five or ten minutes before leaving time."

The workers sometimes "don't like to work overtime, for  
example, when transportation is not guaranteed." And "sometimes  
the girls don't like to stay over because someone is coming to  
collect them by bike or something." Another informant noted that  
"they'll gladly stay over when we pay an overtime allowance." In  
some cases, "drivers and telex operators, for example, have come  
to depend on overtime pay for part of their living expenses."  
Factory workers often receive, for example, a fifty-percent increment  
in wage rate for the first hour's overtime, one hundred percent for  
the second hour, and two hundred percent for each subsequent hour,  
and are "delighted to do overtime, especially before pay day."  
"When I want them to work overtime, they expect something besides  
overtime pay. First they make it clear that they don't like to  
stay over. Then when I say we'll pay a meal allowance they beam  
with delight." One company decided to "pay a meal allowance of  
a hundred rupiah<sup>3)</sup> to workers staying till 8 o'clock." Now the  
workers reportedly don't like to work overtime if they are to finish  
before 8 o'clock. Workers generally will not volunteer to stay  
over without overtime pay, although a small number of exceptional  
cases was reported, for example, of secretaries who worked overtime  
without requesting extra payment, of female office staff and  
trainees who had resided in Japan, and of some assistant managers.

### III. Loyalty and Long Service

#### 1. Loyalty

The Japanese supervisors had the following comments to make about the sense of loyalty felt by their Indonesian employees, a feeling affinitive to the will to work just described. "They have a different attitude to the company. They put their private lives first. If I ask them to come in on a Sunday they'll say it's difficult if they have anything on." "They have a strong sense of individuality and not much responsibility toward the organization." "In the factory the section chiefs and above don't get an overtime allowance so they go home at the regular time. Both management and union members think the same way." "The assistant departmental heads and section chiefs don't seem to think of the company as their own." "They see loyalty to the company differently. But we can't force our views on the seniority system and the family type of company on them."

Some informants pointed out that workers are frequently dishonest with company money and goods. In clerical affairs, problems arise with employees manipulating receipts for purchases and taking rebates from traders, and also taking cuts of "favor monies." Some employees even loaned company funds to their own relatives. "They don't consider this sort of dishonesty as wrong." "The question of trustworthiness in financial matters is the most difficult point in employing Indonesians." "When I give someone a job handling money something almost always happens." "From the top to the bottom

I can't place any trust in them. Not even the section chiefs. Only a small proportion of them are trustworthy." On the other hand, there were supervisors who claimed "there is no dishonesty," or qualified this statement with "as far as I know." "I entrust them with receipts and expenses up to ten thousand rupiah, and there's never once been a mistake." "The girls are seldom dishonest." One informant related that "reportedly one of our competitors made an offer of a five-percent rebate to an employee. The employee went as far as to refuse it, but this didn't lead him to think of asking for a five-percent discount."

Problems also arise through drivers' falsifying receipts for gasoline and repairs to vehicles and through workers' taking goods and fittings and spare parts from the factory. "Even when a theft is discovered they deny any personal knowledge." "They're very good at justifying themselves." "I get angry because the people around won't say anything even if they've seen something happen." "Even though they know it's wrong they justify it on the grounds that the pay is low." "When someone is dismissed for stealing we tell them to come and collect their outstanding pay the next day. They come in nonchalantly, then go around greeting their workmates, saying they've done something wrong and are quitting. They have no sense of shame." "After release from prison they have no qualms at all about coming back to see the people they stole from and put to so much trouble." It was also reported that dishonesty such as the theft of goods was common at first, but is now less prevalent.

## 2. Employee stability

One informant declared: "The Japanese have too strong a sense of belonging. It's not that the people here don't." The following observations were made of the white-collar workers of Jakarta: "Because of the salary the turnover rate is low." "It's fair to say that people stay a long time. The salary is better than in Indonesian companies, and the atmosphere more relaxed than in American companies, which are rationalism incarnate." "If you provide conditions that exactly fit the job then the workers won't move if they get small pay rises." "Since there are a lot of people seeking for a job very few workers quit. Our turnover rate is very low. I worry what to do about promotions in three or four years' time." The situation was similar for factory workers. An informant from a rural factory remote from Jakarta stated that "there are fewer employment opportunities than in the suburbs of Jakarta, so people don't quit. A much greater problem is what to do with people whose performance is poor."

Nevertheless, most informants felt that "generally there is no conception of lifelong employment." This view is not, however, incompatible with the foregoing comments on employee stability, as is clearly recognized in the following explanation concerning office workers: "If the salary were slightly better elsewhere a worker might move. However, there are few employment opportunities and in practice the workforce is stable." The following opinions also surfaced: "One can consider that while a Japanese has a sense of



loyalty toward his company, here a worker is always looking for a more lucrative job." "Japanese always think of entering a job permanently. Here people don't feel guilty or uneasy about changing jobs. You have to provide a good salary and other conditions to keep workers." "Like a Japanese working for a Western company, a worker will stay permanently if he is satisfied with good economic conditions but few opportunities for promotion."

Although long service is considered important, especially among the upper classes, one informant observed that "the best workers tend to leave." Japanese tend to "express their sadness in the strongest terms when someone quits after all the trouble taken to train him," and think "why quit after all we've done for him." In Indonesia, the Japanese ideas of "duty and human feelings are not understood." One supervisor "was saddened to the point of tears trying to persuade a clerk not to leave, but he would not be put off."

The following examples from textile companies, again cited in abbreviated form, illustrate the staff turnover situation in factories in Indonesia.

- (1) The turnover rate is about 3 per month out of 150 employees.
- (2) Of 250 employees in spinning, about one-third leave every year. Of 150 in processing, 2 or 3 leave every month. Usually it's the hands that leave; the supervisors stay on.
- (3) About twenty percent of the staff leave annually. I hear this is quite good for Indonesia.
- (4) The company tries to keep the turnover rate (excluding dismiss-

als) to within one percent per month, but sometimes it exceeds this figure. Annually, I'd say it's around twenty percent.

(5) Turnover is high. About ten percent annually. People quit for no great reason.

(6) To judge from this year's statistics, about five percent of workers quit. This is comparatively low. One reason is that we employ few women; another is the salary.

#### IV. Interpersonal Relationships

##### 1. Superior-inferior relationships

Superiors and older people are shown due respect. The superior-inferior relationships between clerical employees and office juniors, secretaries and drivers, and office staff and factory workers are more distinct than in Japan. "People in the office never dirty their hands." "Discrimination based on educational background is strong; university and academy graduates are proud and look down on high-school and middle-school graduates." Many of the Japanese informants expressed opinions to the effect that "all occupations are not equally respected in this country," and "people are intensely aware of their status." In their contacts with the Japanese the Indonesians' "attitude is polite and differential," although one informant offered the criticism that "they are acutely aware of superior-inferior relationships and won't express their opinions to superiors."

Despite their intense self-awareness, the Indonesians do not

discriminate on grounds of sex, and seldom make distinctions in status between members of the same class. "University graduates are greatly respected, but if a graduate who lands a position by virtue of his degree can't do the job he will soon find himself adrift." "When someone is made section chief his contemporaries from the same university won't listen to what he says." Informants pointed out a general lack of leadership. "Unless someone is declared leader he can't carry out that role. In Japan group leaders emerge spontaneously, but here it doesn't happen." "The group leader is the same sort of man as the workers and he works alongside them. He seldom takes an outside view and changes workers round, or takes action to exert his leadership by gathering all the employees together before they begin work." "Those who won't work are never told to do so; the job is just done by those who will work." "They set great store by interpersonal links. They make no distinction between company and personal affairs." "The group leader seldom scolds his people." They respect the general opinion and don't give orders. They don't even observe the simple matter of not smoking on the factory floor." "They hesitate to caution others about dishonesty." "They smile at someone while warning him about something." "An Indonesian supervisor repeatedly warned a worker about his long hair, but he didn't listen. The supervisor said he couldn't fire him because it would be hard on his family." Most of the Japanese enterprises were established very recently, and the fact that they deemed it necessary to quickly appoint leaders from

among groups of equals may have some bearing on the phenomena just described. The same characteristic features of superior-inferior relationships was also noted in the relationships between colleagues and equals. "People are amiable and don't like arguments." "They won't pursue an adversary ruthlessly." "They won't show someone up in public." "They won't say anything that might hurt someone else." In Japanese eyes these characteristics are sometimes seen as virtues, but in the conduct of business they are perceived as shortcomings.

## 2. Family relationships

Many of the informants pointed out that nepotism plays an important role among Indonesians. The companies adopted quite divergent policies for dealing with this situation. Informants whose companies actively tried to use it to advantage noted that "if things don't go well there is someone to act as mediator," and that they feel "more at ease employing someone who has family links with the company than someone whose background they know nothing about." One company "gives preference to people who have relatives in the company, particularly in positions handling cash." On the other hand, many companies "have eliminated nepotism by stressing the ability principle." However, on occasion some of these companies "could not help but employ" someone recommended by a government official or a partner in the company. But "aside from the fact that the company cannot refuse to admit such people, its

own expectations [that the ~~person~~ might prove useful] also play a part." The work results of **people** employed for nepotistic reasons reportedly "do not always **come up** to those of the openly recruited worker."

Indonesians also place great value on the family in daily life. "They think nothing of coming late to work because they've been seeing a parent off back to the country." "They use company time for personal affairs. For example, they go home because their parents are coming in from the country." "Many's the time someone has come saying he has to go to Jakarta because his mother or father or little brother or someone is sick." "Sometimes a driver will take time off because there is something the matter with one of his brothers or sisters. They tend to put their family life before their work." "They often take time off for a ceremonial occasion for someone of I don't know what relationship." The informants also noted that "friends and relations think nothing of coming to the factory." "When we put something on the relatives turn up. If we organize a bus tour for recreation all the places are filled. This sort of thing isn't regarded as a problem by the employees." At company-sponsored parties for the employees, "friends and families seem to be included. We've had about two hundred people turn up at a party for thirty."

### 3. Apology

Most informants indicated that **their** Indonesian employees would

never apologize when at fault, but simply make excuses. "Under no circumstances will they admit their own mistakes." "When someone drops something he'll say something like we shouldn't use breakables, or there was nowhere suitable to put it, or we shouldn't have such a hard floor." "If someone is doing a job the wrong way, he won't concede the fact but will claim that was how his predecessor taught him." One Japanese commented: "I don't know whether they make excuses for fear of punishment or because it's a national trait;" an Indonesian company president explained it as a legacy from colonial times. Some informants thought they would be "satisfied if the workers acknowledged their errors, " while others were angered because although they "would forgive any mistakes if the workers offered a word of apology, they don't apologize." Japanese set great store by apology in smoothing human relations; Indonesians seemingly do not. However, not all informants agreed entirely: "Those with a better education are more ready to apologize. As one goes down the scale they tend less to do so." "If they are told off in front of people they will make excuses. If I choose the right situation to approach them they will apologize." "I was quite indoctrinated by people with experience in other joint-venture companies with the notion that the workers won't apologize if they make a mistake on the job. But I haven't experienced much that smacks of excuse-making."

Some informants also reported that their workers were becoming accustomed to Japanese company men. "In the case of a reparation



student who had studied in Japan (his wife is Japanese), he would come and say he was sorry right from the start. When they observed this his subordinates started to do something similar, but in their case they would say they were sorry because something or other had happened for such-and-such a reason." "Although they don't apologize in a Japanese fashion, they are starting to acknowledge their mistakes rather than make feeble excuses."

## V. Way of Life

### 1. Islam

Although some of the Indonesian employees are Christian, Catholic and Protestant, most are Moslem. Belief in Islam varies widely from region to region in Indonesia, from fanatical to nominal, and in West Java, in which Jakarta lies, it is reputedly strong, though at least not fanatical. Most of the people moving into Jakarta are Javanese, and their religious beliefs are often moderate. Nevertheless, the roots of Islam have spread deeply into Indonesian life. In their first contacts with Islam, Japanese sometimes tend to overestimate the extent to which the religion influences the behaviour of Indonesians. Informants made the following comments: "Of course, I still have much to learn about Islam, but whenever I'm conscious of having come up against a wall I get the feeling that Islam is at its foundation." "Ideas of mutual help and equality come from this religion, and it's difficult to build a company organization from these." "It seems characteristic

of Islam that reliance on others is not discouraged." "There is the idea that it's only natural to receive something from others." On the other hand, one informant noted: "I don't really know whether the essential problem is religion or poverty. I don't know much about the religion, but there are many things that can be attributed to poverty."

Islam is characterized by such religious practices as prayer five times a day, worship in the mosque on Friday, and fasting from dawn to dusk during the month of Ramadan, which have been assimilated into the daily lives of its adherents. Daily prayer is not, the supervisors pointed out, observed by all employees. In fact, the proportion of employees reported to follow the practice varied greatly: "Only one or two of a team of forty go to prayer." "Even during work about thirty percent pray for about ten minutes each time." "About fifty percent go to prayer five times a day." "More than seventy percent go to prayer." In many instances a place of prayer had been provided in the factory or office; many companies also arranged working hours to allow for Friday worship in the mosque. The executive sections of the companies took the stand that it is necessary to "understand Islam" and be "flexible to the realities." The supervisors on the spot, however, tended to agree with the comment: "Even if I tell someone not to leave his post he will go to pray. This puts me in a spot because it's hard for a Japanese to admonish someone about this. Only about twenty or thirty percent actually go to prayer; about fifty percent go off

somewhere else on the pretext of going to pray. They think that a Japanese won't say anything about religion." Nevertheless, the supervisors are becoming more accustomed to the situation: "At first I felt it strange that worship within working hours should be considered a vested right. Now I don't mind provided it takes place in orderly circumstances." At the same time a change in the conduct of the Indonesians was indicated: "At first there was a demand for time to worship. Now only two or three come for permission to go out to pray before noon." "It gets slacker year by year."

The proportion of workers observing Ramadan ranges from about thirty to ninety percent, although comparatively few carry the fast through for the whole month. "At the start of Ramadan all the workers observe the fast, in the middle about half do, but only a few continue to the end." "Normally we supply about 300 meals, but at the start of Ramadan the number was 50 and at the end 169." One informant observed that "office workers aren't very fervent about fasting, but the lower classes tend to be more so." The comment that "Ramadan has no particular effect on work" was made chiefly in connection with office affairs; in the factory most informants indicated that it does influence work. In one case about thirty percent of workers were fasting and "couldn't concentrate on the job but sat around resting. Productivity fell by about ten percent." In another case "efficiency fell by fifteen to twenty percent." It was also pointed out that "the workers can't do overtime," "in the

factory everyone sleeps on the night shift," and "more workers become ill and absenteeism rises."

Like the Bon Festival and New Year's Day in Japan, the end of Ramadan (Lebaran) is a time when Indonesians return to their native places. Most companies and factories plan about a week's holiday at this time. Nevertheless, the informants registered the following sort of complaint: "Even if we close the factory for five days the subsequent attendance rate is seventy-five to eighty percent." "We included three days of the annual holiday to make a seven-day holiday, but after the holiday we still had about twenty percent absenteeism." "We continued to operate at about seventy percent capacity for about a month after the holiday." It was also pointed out that workers "sometimes apply for three days paid holiday and are then late returning," and "because of transport conditions it takes a worker a fair number of days to return to his native place."

## 2. Personal budgeting

In the view of most Japanese supervisors, their Indonesian employees generally did not plan their expenditures, those who did being members of the upper classes. "Of course, everybody's different, but it seems to me that if they have money they spend it." "They leave everything to chance. I sometimes wonder whether some of them aren't deranged." "They have no idea of living within their means." Some informants explained that the failure to budget arose because "the salary isn't enough to enable them to make any plans,"

and "they have little money at their disposal because of the relatives and in-laws who depend on them." And while "it's hard for the individual to plan his expenditure, since when he has money it's soon nibbled away," at the same time "he can always manage somehow because he can rely on his relatives and in-laws." Although "a Japanese will stick to his budget and not lend money even when he has it," "an Indonesian will lend money to others even though it puts him out." One informant opined that Indonesians believe "money is something that comes and goes and that it's virtuous to give it to the poor. They have no attachment to money since even without it they'll get by somehow. This behaviour is bound up with Islam."

Informants thought that "anything they want they buy immediately. They soon spend all their salary," with the result that "for about four days before pay day they don't eat or drink anything." One concluded that "they seem to have no heart for making sacrifices in order to save." In the view of the supervisors their workers are greatly inclined to spend their money: "They spend their money on clothes. The staff wear something different every day." "Even the girls come in fine leather shoes. I want them to learn to live within their means, but they can't understand." "The men want to buy watches, sunglasses, clothes and shoes, and the women want clothes, shoes, earrings and bracelets." "They long for luxury goods like radios and tape-recorders." "When they start to get higher salaries they do things like travel to Surabaya by plane

and look for a better house to rent. They have a strong urge to enjoy life now."

Most supervisors considered that their employees "had not acquired the habit of saving." Reportedly, "only ten or twenty percent save up the expenses for childbirth." Mutual financing associations (arisan) of coworkers are extensive, and private loans are also generally widespread. "If you become slightly familiar with someone he may ask you for a loan." The main reasons loans are sought include marriage, children's sickness, childbirth, tenancy contracts, and house repair. One supervisor told of a worker who "borrowed 100,000 rupiah against an income of 20,000 rupiah, and what's more it was for his relatives." To him "this conduct was the most incomprehensible."

#### VI. Dealing with the Realities

In the company office or the factory work proceeds through the cooperation of peoples of heterogeneous cultures. In this situation the given ideal is "industrial culture" and "Japanese culture." The former includes a rational code of behaviour aimed at carrying out production or achieving an objective; in the latter these are colored by the Japanese mode of thinking. Although the Indonesians are numerically superior, their culture occupies an inferior position in the company or factory. This culture can be considered to be a complex of the "traditional cultures" of the various races and of a certain kind of "culture of poverty." The Japanese



requently tried to explain the generation of this complex in terms of the influences of climate and natural features, colonialism, and Islam.

The complex of "industrial culture" and "Japanese culture" constitutes a pattern of working to which the Indonesians must become accustomed if they are to adapt to life in a Japanese company or factory. The problem faced by the Japanese is how to deal with the coloring of "industrial culture" by singularly Japanese elements. Basically, three different attitudes can be distinguished: (1) Unnecessary friction should be avoided by stressing international awareness and abandoning all practices that arise from Japanese conceptions (for example, the family principle of administration); (2) unnecessary friction should be avoided by understanding and showing sufficient concern for the indigenous culture, even though this may entail some sacrifice of efficiency; (3) workers should be educated so that they appreciate the effectiveness of Japanese methods in production and voluntarily follow the Japanese system.

In practice, however, these attitudes cannot be completely separated; just as an individual's attitude may comprise a combination of these elements, so may the individuals in an enterprise hold disparate views. The following examples, excerpted from statements made in interviews, demonstrated the approaches taken by the Japanese to their current problems, approaches which are based on the above attitudes.

(1) Job Performance      In some companies workers are "trained so that they can perform a wide range of jobs" and the supervisors "strive to give them an overall picture of the company organization by providing a continuous flow of information." In other companies the supervisors endeavor to secure the success of an operation by "making clear rules," "subdividing work as far as possible," "repeating instructions in full detail, without listening to employees' opinions," and "continually checking the state of progress of the job."

(2) Employee Stability      There are two schools of thought: "Salary alone keeps the worker in the job, and salary checks should not be neglected;" and "atmosphere as well as salary is important." The Japanese enterprises sometimes have "an arrangement not to take each others' workers." One informant also commented: "Even if a worker leaves, from a broad educational point of view we have at least contributed something to job training." In either case, it was considered essential, "given the frequency with which workers move, always to maintain a reserve of personnel."

(3) Japanese-style Administration      Those in favor of Japanese-style administration thought "certain kinds of family organization are acceptable to the Indonesians." Opponents considered that "the clumsy introduction of Japanese emotivity is likely to cause problems." Others believed that "something in-between should be sought."

(4) Dishonesty        Again there are two schools of thought: "We regard losses through dishonesty as part of our costs and seldom follow the matter up;" and, alternatively, "if we were indulgent dishonesty would increase, and therefore we follow it up rigorously." In both cases companies were trying to establish systems that are proof against dishonesty.

(5) Interpersonal Relationships        One informant reported that "following the example of Westerners, we maintain the superior-inferior relationships. It's better not to interfere in private matters." Another disagreed: "We associate on an equal footing and make up for our defficiencies in the language by our attitude." One informant stated that "when someone makes a mistake we don't inquire into it deeply;" another that "we pursue a matter until the offender acknowledges his error." One informant said he avoided "reproving a subordinate in front of others;" another had his workers "understand that scolding and warning are two different things." Concerning apology, one informant had "trained the workers to apologize;" another declared, "I don't let a matter end with words alone, I issue a warning letter."

(6) Religion        One informant opined that "whether or not they're used, it's better to set up places of prayer, mosques, and so on." Another's attitude was more open: "I don't think of religion as taboo, but talk frankly with them about it." One informant stated: "In engaging workers, from the start we have chosen those with a tolerant attitude toward religion."

(7) Loans Informants' responses ranged from "we refuse all personal loans," and "as a company we grant no loans whatsoever," to "we will give an advance on salary," "we support and foster cooperatives for the employees," and "we have established a loan system."

In addition to the above, the attitudes that "the company is not a social welfare body," and that "although it is important to provide employment opportunities, it is essential to raise efficiency by training skilled workers" were in some degree common to the Japanese enterprises. In the short-term it is possible that these ideas may conflict with the policies of the Indonesian government. The points of contention center on the interests of private enterprise and the nature of international aid.

#### Concluding Remarks

In this report I have attempted to present an ordered picture of the Japanese view of Indonesian employees in Japanese and Japanese-Indonesian enterprises. Many of the Japanese informants were selected for overseas service, and most were more highly motivated than the average Japanese. Those informants who held preconceived ideals sometimes expressed their observations of the realities of Indonesia in harsh terms. A few of the supervisors, however, compared the actuality with their lowest expectations and gave a generous appraisal. In sort, I have recorded an image of Indonesian workers that is colored by Japanese industrial culture.

Clearly the observations are partial, and undoubtedly they contain many points which the Indonesians would dispute. At this stage I will refrain from judging the fairness of the observations. Before doing so it is important to investigate the lifestyle of the Indonesians themselves and how it is being adapted to the Japanese company. These aspects I will discuss in a future report.

#### Footnote

- 1) On the interpersonal relationships between Japanese wives and their Indonesian maids, which constitutes another part of this survey, see Reiko Tsubouchi, "Japanese wives and Indonesian maids in Jakarta," *Tonan Ajia Kenkyu* [Southeast Asian Studies] Vol. 15, No. 1 (Kyoto University, 1977).
- 2) Mr. Kiyoshi Mimura, Jakarta office director of JETRO, rendered invaluable assistance in the conduct of this survey, for which I am grateful. Here I will not name all those who also gave up their valuable time to cooperate in the survey, but nevertheless wish to express my sincere gratitude to them.
- 3) U.S. \$1 = 415 rupiah.