

## **FARMERS' ALMANAC AND TRADITIONAL WISDOM: RICE CULTIVATION IN THE NORTHERN REGION OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA<sup>1</sup>**

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*Paddy is an important plant as it is the daily staple for large segments of the global population. As such, in some cultures it is revered as a sacred object. To ensure abundant crops, farmers learn from nature thereby creating new knowledge on paddy cultivation. Ancient Malay farmers were sensitive to natural phenomena, observing and taking note of the effects of certain repeated phenomena. From this, they developed methods of segmenting the cycle of rice cultivation (farmer's almanac) and invaluable tips on paddy planting from traditional knowledge. They held steadfast to these practices in the hope of obtaining abundant yield on their crops. This essay shows the extent to which rice farmers still observe traditional knowledge in planting paddy. Nevertheless, modernisation and technological advancement has gradually eroded such practices while those that contravene the Islamic faith have been gradually phased out.*

Keywords: paddy, *kuku kambing*, farmer's almanac, traditional wisdom

### **INTRODUCTION**

Rice is the staple food of the people of Malaysia and large sections of the world's population. Owing to its importance for daily needs, myths, legends and stories abound about the origins of rice. Legend has it that rice was derived from the valley of the Ganges in India. Others claim that rice comes from the Yangtze River valley in China. Indonesians however beg to differ because their historical records show that the ancient Javanese people were already cultivating rice long before the Indians and Chinese who migrated to Indonesia. Javanese legend claims that the rice plant comes from a fairy princess, famed for her beauty, named Dewi Trisnawati. Similarly in Thailand, Japan and Malaysia, rice is considered to possess the "spirit of a woman". Rice is believed to possess attractive, feminine features such as beauty, youth and fairness. In Sabah for example, the Kadazan Dusuns believe it is the spirit of a beautiful woman named Huminodun who had been sacrificed that has enabled farmers to yield abundant harvests even until today. This is why the *Kaamatan* or Harvest Festival is held

every year to pay homage to the spirit of rice, for which Huminodun was sacrificed (Erdiehazzuan, 2007). In China by contrast, rice is associated with a time of famine and legend states that a dog with a grain of rice seed on its tail actually saved the people from starvation (Mohd. Kasri, 2008: 5).

Meanwhile, Jason Londo, a PhD candidate in Biology from Washington University and his supervisor Barbara A. Schaal, managed to discover the origins of the two major rice varieties grown today in various countries around the world. Genetic experimentation to study the DNA chain of more than 300 varieties of rice which are either cultivated or grown wild found that *Oryza sativa indica* rice was originally grown in India, Myanmar and Thailand whereas the variety of rice known as *Oryza sativa japonica* originated from South China (<http://rice.genomics.org.cn/rice/index2.jsp>, accessed 28 August 2014).

Based on the geographical location from which rice was first discovered, it is not unusual to find that rice cultivation in Malaysia is more concentrated in the northern region of peninsular Malaysia which is also the region closest to the countries from which rice is said to have originated. Furthermore, the discovery of traces of rice cultivation from around 6,000 years ago in a cave in Thailand suggests that rice had long existed in that country. Similarly, in China because there are many claims that rice has been cultivated by the people in the Yangtze River delta around 4,000 years BC. In Malaysia, rice is believed to have been planted since the early centuries AD in the Bujang Valley of Kedah. However, structured rice cultivation began in 1664, when rice was grown using the waters of Sungai Korok. Legislation on ownership of the land in 1667 called *Undang-undang Dato' Seri Paduka Tuan* resulted in the expansion of the Kedah economy due to rice production ([http://www.mykedah2.com/10heritage/108\\_1.html](http://www.mykedah2.com/10heritage/108_1.html)). This article attempts to study the pre-modern methods of rice cultivation practised by the community of rice farmers in the northern region of peninsular Malaysia notably Kedah and Perlis by analysing various myths and facts about the origin of rice, specifically in their farmers' almanac and traditional wisdom.

## ALMANAC

People nowadays have probably never heard of the term *piama* or "almanac"; however, this term was popular among previous generations of the farming community. The 4th edition of the Kamus Dewan (2004: 1203) defines *piama* as follows:

*piama* II = *musim* ~ musim yang baik untuk memulakan penanaman padi, musim hujan; *awal* ~ permulaan musim hujan; *sayup* ~ akhir musim hujan; *semasak buah* ~ genap satu musim dalam setahun.

[tr. *piama ll* = *musim* ~ a good season to begin planting paddy, the rainy season; *awal* ~ the beginning of the rainy season; *sayup* ~ the end of the rainy season; *semasak buah* ~ a full season in a year.]

R. J. Wilkinson (2011: 157) also includes *piama* in his dictionary, explaining it as follows:

The right season (For beginning rice-planting): the rains: Ch. Jcon. 59, and of. *Piantan*. *Awal p*: the first rains. *Buah p*; the fruit that ripens to indicate when rice-planting should commence, i.e. the poach fruit (*Elateviospermum-tapos*). *Sayup p*: close or <fading away> of the wet season: last rains, *Sa-masak buah p*: one solar or seasonal year; Raj Muda 40. cf. also *peviang*.

To be precise, *piama* refers to the segmenting of the paddy planting season to determine the best period in which to begin planting paddy. The *piama bendang* takes place during the rainy season; this enables the parcels of land to be flooded and the farmers to till their land in preparation for the subsequent sowing of seeds. Ancient farmers did not have written knowledge of weather changes; however, they were keen observers of nature. As such, they formulated guidelines based on climate changes to determine the onset of *piama bendang*. Some of the natural signs they faithfully observed were when the climate became rainy and windy, when the soil became sticky, when people flew their kites, when the *buah tampoi* began to ripen, and the ships bearing the Bugis began arriving (Wilkinson, 2011: 157). These guidelines were formulated based on observation and in-depth recognition of changes in nature and human behaviour. In this way, they could schedule and match the months of the year with the observed changes in climate. For example, they have defined the seasons as follows:

1. February to April (dry season)
2. May (transitory season)
3. June to September (southern/Javanese season)
4. July (mini dry season)
5. August and September (rainy season or *piama* season)
6. October (transitory season)
7. November, December and January – northerly season, season of turbulence, closing of the estuary, season for mosquito nets, hornbill season.

The connection between the months with *piama bendang* becomes clearer if we refer to the notes of Tuan Haji Wan Sulaiman bin Wan Sidik who was the Syekhul Islam of Kedah (1918–1935) which were found stuck to the

wall of the house of the Padang Pusing village head, Tuan Haji Muhammad Ariff (Ismail, 1986: 96). According to him the following twelve-month *piama bendang* for Kedah and areas under Kedah rule were noted in Arabic and Siamese script in ancient texts according to observations of their forefathers:

Table 1: *Piama bendang* month

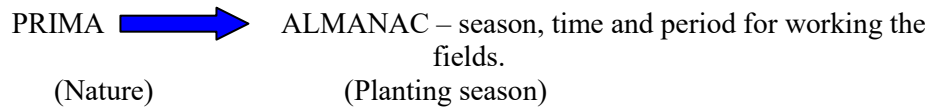
<i>Piama bendang</i> month (Arabic/Siamese)	<i>Piama bendang</i> month (Malay)	Equivalent in Roman calendar	Observations of nature/farmer's reaction
Kaus	Sa	23 November to 22 December	Cassia tree begins to flower, marking the end of farmer's almanac.
Jadyi	Dua	23 December to 21 January	The second month of farmer's almanac. At the end of this month, the floods will subside and the fish will enter the paddy plot, while terrapins return upriver to spawn.
Delu	Tiga	22 January to 20 February	The third month of farmer's almanac. At this time the <i>macang</i> tree will flower. The easterly wind begins to blow and the mid-growing rice can be planted.
Hut	Empat	21 February to 21 March	The fourth month of the farmer's almanac. The <i>durian</i> tree begins to flower and the easterly wind gathers strength.
Hamal	Lima	22 March to 21 April	The fifth month of the farmer's almanac. On the 15th of this month one cannot see one's own shadow when standing in the sun at high noon.
Thaur	Enam	22 April to 22 May	The sixth month of the farmer's almanac. <i>KerANJI</i> petals will fall and farmers go down to the field to store water and fertilise the soil.

(continued on next page)

Table 1: (continued)

<i>Piama bendang</i> month (Arabic/Siamese)	<i>Piama bendang</i> month (Malay)	Equivalent in Roman calendar	Observations of nature/farmer's reaction
Jauza	Tujuh	23 May to 22 June	The seventh month of the farmer's almanac. Nurseries are prepared and light paddy seeds are strewn (paddy that is harvested twice a year).
Saratan	Lapan	23 June to 23 July	The eighth month of the farmer's almanac. Stars can be seen at dawn. Seeds from the mid-growing rice or heavy paddy seeds can be sown.
Asad	Sembilan	24 July to 23 August	The ninth month of the farmer's almanac. Planting of mid-growing and heavy paddy can begin.
Sumbulah	Sepuluh	24 August to 23 September	The tenth month of the farmer's almanac. Once again, one cannot see one's own shadow when standing in the sun at high noon.
Mizan	Sebelas	24 September to 23 October	The eleventh month of the farmer's almanac. The <i>burung balai</i> will chirp as a sign that it is in the westerly quarter of the farmer's almanac.
Akrab	Dua belas	24 October to 23 November	The twelfth month of the farmer's almanac. The <i>burung ruak ruak</i> calls frantically, marking the end of the farmer's almanac.

The matching of the months of the year with the seasons is a clear sign of the ancient farmers' knowledge. Even without formal agricultural education, these farmers are guided by nature in planning their paddy farming activities. The diagram shows the connection between nature (*prima*) and the planting period (farmer's almanac) as observed by ancient farming communities:



Season in the diagram indicates that there are two seasons in the year in northern peninsula Malaysia namely the rainy season and the dry season. The rainy season is the planting season in the farmer's almanac whereas paddy is harvested during the dry season. The farmers will work their fields according to the farmer's almanac, where the sun evolves in the north for six months and in the south for the remaining six months of the year (Kedah Paddy Museum, 2004). The farmers recognise that the almanac is about to begin when rains suddenly fall during the mid-day sun. They also recognise that this is the fourth month (April). At this time, the earth is parched due to the dry season from February to April. According to paddy farmer Hajah Zainah binti Daud, farmers also recognise the beginning of the almanac during the drought when chickens suddenly hop on to the fence, people sneezing continuously and reared fish or fish in the well begin to jump about. All these behaviour mark the changing of the seasons. The hot and dry weather becomes cold and wet. Haji Mat Nayan (1986: 39) confirms this observation:

During the drought or in the absence of rain if a chicken suddenly jumps onto a fence, this indicates that the rains are approaching ... If we sneeze a few times in a row this also marks the coming of rain. There are also people who note the coming of rain by observing the behaviour of fish. Fish supposedly have innate knowledge of rain (when it will fall and when it will stop), better than humans. As such, they believe that signs taken from the behaviour of fish never fails to predict the onset of rain. If the fish jumps about in a jar or in the well and so on it indicates that rain will soon fall.

The ancient beliefs to predict the onset of rain after a period of drought can be observed to have some truth. Animals have a keen instinct that is sensitive to the slightest change in weather. This has been affirmed by the fact that tsunamis or other natural disasters were frequently prefaced by unusual incidents in the animal world. Sneezing continuously is also a physical reaction to weather changes. The 51 year old Suhaini bin Haji Hamid who has planted paddy since his teens confirms that once such signs have been noted, heavy rains would soon fall during the fifth month (May). These rains are called *keranji* petals (Ismail, 1986: 96), as they encourage the growth of fungus on rotting tree stumps. They also cause the wild trees to flower and marks the mating season for cows and buffalos while snakes emerge from their hiding places in search of water (Haji Mat Nayan, 1986: 38). From our own observation we would notice that fungus

grows on rotting tree stumps or ant hills in the month of May while *durian* and *rambutan* trees will flower also during this month. At this time, the farmers will irrigate their fields and fertilise their fields to enrich the soil. In the sixth month (June) the farmers will prepare the nurseries. Some farmers begin to strew light paddy seeds during this time. At the end of June or early July, mid-growing or heavy seeds are sown in the nurseries.

## **SELECTING SEEDS**

To ensure a bountiful crop, ancient farmers adopted a few traditional tips which were in the form of advice, signs or useful guidelines that were passed down from their forefathers to ensure success. Tradition refers to accepted practices encompassing customs, beliefs and so forth which were eventually adopted and became the accepted practices of the community. Hence, traditional tips were held in high esteem by previous generations who had taken these practices to heart, making them part and parcel of their cultural local wisdom. In seed selection, farmers of the old days believed that good crops would yield good seeds. Failure to select good seeds would result in poor crops. Farmers were not free to choose paddy seeds willy nilly, but had to adhere to certain tips based on the position of the Pleiades star cluster to ensure the seeds selected are compatible with the almanac. This shows that paddy seeds which were suitable to be sowed will vary according to the almanac.

Based on a farmer's tip first recorded by Haji Mat Nayan (1986: 44) and followed till today, if the star cluster is light or luminous at the top, but is dim at the tail, then that it is an appropriate time in the almanac to plant white paddy. This appearance of the star cluster indicates that rainfall will decrease and therefore the appropriate type of paddy to sow is light paddy so that the plants will not die during drought. If the appearance of the cluster is reversed, that is dim at the top but light and luminous at the tail then it is best to plant red paddy which is heavy as there will be prolonged heavy rainfall. If light paddy is planted, it is likely to be submerged and destroyed by prolonged flooding.

Another tip for choosing suitable paddy varieties for planting is to take a bunch of red paddy seeds, then divide them equally into four parts. Or, divide the number of seeds from a bunch by four. If there is one grain remaining, its interpretation has some connection with the "soil". Red paddy is not suitable for planting during this almanac as it is believed to be susceptible to attack by bugs or other natural disasters. However, if two grains remain, its interpretation is related to "water." Red paddy which is "heavy" should be planted during this almanac as it is resistant to prolonged flooding and its stalk is tougher and not easily broken by the weight of water during flood. If three grains remain, it is interpreted to be related to "fire" indicating that if red paddy is planted, its clumps will be destroyed due to "red" disease or attack by brown plant hoppers. If no

grains remain this indicates "wind," whereby the type of paddy is suitable for planting as it will be safe from any disaster (Haji Mat Nayan, 1986: 44).

In case of farmers who knew their rice was not compatible with the almanac yet still insist planting that particular variety, they were required to pray fervently to God and then to repeat the above tips. If the result was still unfavourable, then the farmers had to pray more fervently and to repeat the selection of paddy as described in the tips above. If the result was still unfavourable, the farmers need to repeat the action up to only three times. If the results are still unfavourable then it would be prudent for them to select another paddy variety to be planted.

Once the seeds and type of paddy have been selected, the seeds will be immersed in a well or ditch so that they bud. During this soaking process, there are also tips that can be applied to predict whether the rice will yield a bountiful harvest or otherwise. According to the observation of the ancient farmers, if large bubbles appear when the sacks of paddy seeds are discharged into the ditch or wells, this indicates that the crop will fail or it will not be fruitful. Conversely, if bubbles appear fine and plentiful, this foretells a bountiful crop for that year. After three nights' soaking, the seeds will be left for two days on land before sown in the nursery which has been made ready (Haji Mat Nayan, 1986: 44).

## **SOWING THE SEEDS**

When sowing seeds, ancient farmers would make a raft nursery, which was a muddy seedbed sprinkled with seeds which had been soaked and covered with grass (Haji Abdul Kadir bin Haji Abdul Hamid). Sowing should not be done carelessly because this will have far reaching consequences. Thus, farmers would follow traditional tips in sowing seeds by calculating the appropriate time according to the Hijri month. Even-numbered days such as the second, fourth, sixth or eighth day of the month are the most auspicious dates for sowing. The goal is to ensure the paddy pods are not empty (no seeds), but rather pithy (full) in order to yield a bountiful harvest. Typically, farmers will start the process by reciting certain mantras so as to ensure a fruitful harvest. When sowing the seeds, farmers would stick to the traditional tips by positioning their bodies and gaze towards the "open skies" (any cloudless part of the sky). Plain flour will be sprinkled before the seeds are sown. In fact, before the seeds are released from the hand, the farmers have to close their eyes and imagine the nursery or sapling paddy plants growing lush and green. After visualising the desired result, the farmers continue sowing the paddy seeds.

Closing the eyes is not only aimed at imagining a fertile rice field, but also to "blind" any disease or injury from viewing the seeds of new paddy that have been sown. Typically, farmers who adopt certain traditional methods would



also plant charms at the site and recite incantations as a form of protection so that the seeds are protected from any diseases, pests and natural disasters.

## **PLANTING THE PADDY**

While waiting for the seeds to grow farmers will begin ploughing their rice plots that have been flooded leaving the straw and grass to ferment in the stagnant water. This will add nutrients to the soil and is usually performed in the month of Asad (July 24 to August 23) (Ismail, 1986: 97).

Then, after 35 days (for light rice) or 44 days (heavy rice) in the nursery, the seedlings will be pulled out and tied in clumps. Certain tips must be followed on the day of removing the seedlings from the nursery. If farmers want to remove the seedlings and plant them in the field, they should look to the "*Bintang Celaka*". This is to protect the newly planted seedlings from disaster. To that end, the bunches of seedlings will be transferred to the paddy field and broken up into small parts before planting. The most appropriate box must be selected to begin the work of planting rice. According to traditional tips, the best area to begin planting is in the coolest areas which can be identified during the ploughing. The selected area must be marked off with wooden stakes to protect the rice plants from all dangers.

Next, the rice bunches brought to the paddy field are broken up into smaller fragments before they are transplanted into the field using *kuku kambing* (tool to plant rice). Among the tips of the ancient farmers, the plant must be first planted in a direction opposite from the direction of the "open skies," which was the direction of paddy sown in the nursery. Then, the rice should be planted in three rows of nine shrubs and left for three days before planting is resumed across the other plots owned by the farmer. If the tips are adhered to, it is believed that the rice will grow well in the rainy months of August and September, and then start ripening gradually by the end of October to November.

While waiting for the paddy to ripen, a few tips need to be followed carefully in order to prevent the paddy from "sulking" (Haji Mat Nayan, 1986: 48). First, the paddy should be monitored and loved as if it were your own child. In the old days farmers believed that paddy plant could also feel pain and "hurt" like humans. If paddy is cared for and loved it will ripen abundantly to last up to the next almanac even though the land is only two or three *relongs*. Second, farmers also need to "wash" their paddy plants, as it was believed that washing the paddy would make it fertile and fruitful. The trick is to splash water on the clumps of paddy while singing a mantra like a lullaby for the sleeping paddy. This treatment will give peace to the paddy plants. Some farmers also choose to recite verses from the Quran to their rice plants. According to Hajah Wan Hatijah Wan Hashim, in the past her parents and grandparents would read the mantra for their rice plants to appease the spirits and this yielded bountiful harvests.

However, time and developments in technology have enhanced religious awareness especially through access to religious talks and as a result such blasphemous practices have been abandoned. Religious teachers for example, urge their followers to recite prayers from the Prophet Muhammad to improve their livelihoods, instead of believing in superstitions. The prayer reads:

Bismillahillazi la yadhurru ma'as mihi, syai'un fil ardhi, walaa fissama'i, wahuwassami'ul 'alim. This means: There is no servant [of Allah] who offers prayers every morning and evening in the name of Allah who does not impart harm on earth and in heaven, and He is All Hearing and All Knowing.

Third, farmers should call the rice by its favourite name of "*Merung Masuk Nan Semulai*." If the rice leans over into a neighbouring plot owned by another, it should immediately be straightened or adjusted so that it lies in its owner's plot. The farmer should also persuade "*Merung Masuk Nan Semulai*" to remain in his field. If left unchecked, the "rice spirit" may move to the neighbouring plot and make the neighbour prosper while its owner's yield decreases. However, if another farmer's rice droops or falls into one's plot, then it should be left alone. The rice should in fact be welcomed to stay, as follows:

"*Merung Masuk Nan Semulai*" it is better if you do not remain with so and so (your owner). He wants to beat you and give you away, to sell you to others. He is careless and does not take good care of you. You are better off here with me. I have prepared a lovely place for you.

(Haji Mat Nayan, 1986: 49)

If paddy plant has been well cared for as above within approximately 44 days from the date of planting, paddy can be harvested before the monsoon season begins in December.

## **HARVESTING THE PADDY**

Harvesting would usually take place when the paddy starts turning reddish yellow. Before harvest there are a few more traditional tips that should be adhered to by the farmers. For instance, three days before the harvest, the farmers must come every day to visit their fields and ensure that no rice stalks reach into adjacent plots owned by others. Then, the rice should be alerted as follows:

I, your father (or mother) would like to tell you that in two (or three) days (or tomorrow) I am coming to bring you home. Do not be surprised or shocked.

(Haji Mat Nayan, 1986: 50)

The paddy plant should be informed that harvesting work will be done so that the rice spirit is not shocked. Then, when the paddy stalks are to be cut, the earlier practice of facing the right as performed during the sowing and planting stages should be repeated once again. In addition, the farmer's saliva (from the tip of the tongue) should be applied to the tip of the scythe while reciting the mantras or sacred verses of the Quran and blowing on to it so that rice stalks do not feel pain when cut. On the first day only three lots consisting of three handfuls of paddy stalks can be cut. The rice stalks that have been cut on the first day must be tied into bunches and lay out on a bed made from its straw.

In the farmer's almanac, paddy is usually harvested once or twice, even three times a year. For farmers who only grow heavy paddy the harvests are only once a year. There are farmers who grow heavy and light paddy in different plots therefore they could harvest paddy twice a year. Similarly, the farmers who grow only light paddy can harvest twice a year because such type ripens quickly. The process of sowing and planting the seeds up until the harvest takes between four to six months. Thus, light paddy cultivation begins in the first almanac beginning in late December with harvesting taking place in late February or early March. Light paddy cultivation for the second almanac will begin in late May and harvested at the end of July or August. Meanwhile, mid to heavy rice paddy will be sown in June and harvested in late October or November as its cultivation, growth and ripening takes a longer time, at least seven months. Some farmers choose to grow light and heavy paddy at the same time. In those cases, a number of plots will be allocated to light paddy while the remaining plots are for the heavy variety. These farmers would like to ensure that they produce rice throughout the year to sustain their livelihood.

Immediately after the completion of the harvest the farmer's almanac for the year comes to an end. Typically, prior to having a well-deserved rest after tirelessly working the rice fields, farmers would burn the rice straws and await the arrival of the monsoon or westerly wind which brings heavy rains. This was the time when the earth will mix with the ash and the remnant of straw will ferment, returning the nutrients into the soil and preparing the land for the next planting season. This was the process carried out repeatedly by farmers before modern farming techniques were introduced.

## OTHER TRADITIONAL TIPS ON PLANTING PADDY

It is an old Malay saying that traditional tips come before any knowledge systems as such tips form the basis of knowledge. There were numerous tips observed by ancient farmers in carrying out the farmers' almanac. Besides the tips described above, several other traditional tips will be discussed in this section.

One such tip is after the soil had been tilled, fertilised and the seeds have been sown, farmers should prepare a feast of bananas and corn for the children of the village. These should be eaten in the paddy fields. This practice was believed to ensure that the paddy plants would be healthy and blossom with nutrients just as the children who had been fed with the bananas and corn. To prevent the young plants from being attacked by illness and pests, a ritual known as *bersahut* would be performed. Here a small amount of paddy would be strewn in a corner of the farmer's field. The farmer would then address the diseases and pests as follows:

This is for you, have it for this year – do not attack other plants.  
Do not disturb the other plants, next year I will give you some more.

(Haji Ishak bin Haji Hanafiah)

It is believed that many farmers still observe this ritual as they do not consider this as an act of appeasing the spirits; on the contrary, their intention is to donate food to the fauna whilst appealing to them to be considerate and not destroy their hard work by attacking their paddy plants.

The rice growing community also believed in the paddy spirit. As described above, the spirit was believed to be in the form of a young fair maiden. As such, she must be humoured so that she is not slighted and starts to sulk as this will adversely affect the yield for that season. To appease the spirit, ancient farmers would select the best stalks and tie them together in a bunch. After three nights or three dusks, on a windless day, the farmers would call out to the spirit:

Hey "*Merung Masuk Nan Semulai*", this is your father (or mother) I am here to bring you home.

(Haji Mat Nayan, 1986: 50)

This would be performed repeatedly until the rice stalks show movement or wave around in the air; this is a sign that the spirit has arrived and is willing to be brought home. The bunch of stalks is then cut up, placed in a sack and kept in a bowl.

A tray with a glass of water, face powder, and a comb and eye liner from Makkah was then placed beside the sack. These are left there for the spirit to make her pretty. Every evening at sunset the spirit is believed to creep into the

rice bowl. Hajah Wan Hatijah binti Haji Wan Hashim says that every farmer possessed a rice bowl to symbolise his rice fields. If the spirit was pleased with the offerings in the rice bowl then the rice plants would be well protected and yield bountiful crops. The reverse could also occur. Legend has it that there was once a farmer who would creep to his rice bowl in the evenings and converse with the rice spirit. His wife grew suspicious of his behaviour and began to spy on him. A huge row ensued and this upset the spirit who left the rice bowl never to return. As a result, the harvests dwindled year by year and finally the farmer was ruined.

Besides this, ancient communities believed that while the rice was ripening the farmers should sit in their fields with a piece of cloth on their shoulder. This cloth should be waved as though waving to someone. In this way they would beckon to the rice spirit. At the same time they should say:

"Come close to me, enter into my plot."

(Hajah Zainah binti Daud)

In the event that rats attacked the paddy plants, the ancient farmers believed that one should not curse at the pests for if that was done, the paddy plants would be eaten up by the rats in retaliation. To counter the attack, the farmers would speak nicely to the rats. They would address the rats as "Cik Siti" and standing on the edge of their fields, say to the rats:

"Cik Siti, please keep this paddy for your descendants."

(Haji Ishak bin Haji Hanafiah)

By speaking nicely to the pests, it was believed that they would leave the paddy alone. To counter other diseases and pests, the ancient farmers believed in these three superstitions, namely not to eat rice late, not to eat rice after sunset and not to fry rice at night. Orange peel and certain leaves were also believed to keep such diseases at bay. These ingredients would be cut up and strewn all over the rice field. The scent from these ingredients would keep the pests away. Another tip is to sow the paddy seeds during a "dark moon" as the dark would symbolically hide the rice from any diseases. The farmers would also walk around their paddy plots during a drizzle whilst singing praises to God and appealing to Him so protect the paddy from disease or pests.

When cutting the paddy stalk (Figure 1), ancient farmers would adhere to the tip that if they could cut ten stalks in one breath, their yield would be ten-fold. While keeping the paddy in a basket certain mantras would be recited. An example of a Siamese mantra is:

"Ma a ok mani mama,  
A ka cai mani mama"

(Haji Mat Nayan, 1986: 51)

These are some examples of traditional tips that form the basis of knowledge on planting paddy that used to be observed by ancient farmers according to their farmer's almanac, specifically in Kedah and other states of the northern region of peninsular Malaysia.



Figure 1: Ripen rice pods.  
Source: Author's collection.

## CONCLUSION

From the study of rice growing knowledge in Kedah, it was discovered that farmers held very similar views on the farmers' almanac and tips on planting paddy. They had a rather sophisticated manner of determining the farmer's almanac as they consulted the Islamic and western calendars; they observed both the Arabic and Siamese system of naming months. According to the Gregorian system, the fields were worked from May to July and the rice must be harvested during the easterly winds, around November and December. Based on the Islamic calendar and the Arabic and Siamese calendar system, as noted in *Intisari Kebudayaan Melayu Kedah*, the farmers' almanac were based on these dates although they are still in line with the Gregorian calendar. Even with modern

farming techniques which allows rice to be grown twice or three times a year, there are a couple of traditional farming techniques which are still relevant; these are applied during specific months by present day farmers.

Many traditional tips from the ancient farmers are no longer practised by farmers today due to the influence of science, technology and religious awareness. Farmers feel that some of the tips are blasphemous or no longer relevant in the modern world. Hence they are best forgotten.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that there are several tips which are still in use until today. The practise of speaking to paddy plants is still observed as plants are living objects and as such are believed to possess spirits, even though the spirits are no longer thought to be a beautiful maiden. Similarly, farmers still talk to pests in their attempt to keep them away from their crop.

There are in fact many more traditional tips and practices for planting paddy observed by ancient communities in the northern region of peninsula Malaysia. However, these practices and knowledge have become extinct with the death of their practitioners. Even if they could be recovered, most present day farmers are reluctant to even talk about them out of adherence to religious teachings and fear that they may lead to *syirik* or blasphemy.

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## **NOTE**

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## INTERVIEWS

1. Name: Encik Suhaini Hj Hamid (51 years old)  
Address: No. 62, Lorong 1, Ayer Hitam, Jalan Putera, 06150 Alor Setar, Kedah.  
Date of interview: 1 May 2008.
2. Name: Tuan Haji Ishak Haji Hanafiah (62 years old)  
Address: No. 52, Lorong 1, Ayer Hitam, Jalan Putera, 06150 Alor Setar, Kedah.  
Date of interview: 3 May 2008.
3. Name: Puan Hajah Zainah Daud (75 years old)  
Address: No. 100, Ayer Hitam, Jalan Putera, 06150 Alor Setar, Kedah.  
Date of interview: 25 May 2009.
4. Name: Tuan Haji Mohamad Haji Ali (72 years old)  
Address: Kampung Kaki Bukit, Perlis.  
Date of interview: 26 May 2009.
5. Name: Tuan Haji Abdul Kadir Haji Abdul Hamid (78 years old)  
Address: Kampung Gelam, KM 7, Jalan Dato' Kumbar, 05300 Alor Star, Kedah.  
Date of interview: 27 May 2009.
6. Name: Hajah Wan Hatijah binti Haji Wan Hashim (73 years old)  
Address: Gerai Ikan, Kampung Tempayan Pecah, 06150 Ayer Hitam, Jalan Putera, Kedah.  
Date of interview: 16 August 2014.