What Do Those Hundred Men Do?

One day I went to a Sng'oi settlement deep in the mountains, a few hours' walk through the jungle. It was quite late when I reached the settlement. As usual, someone was waiting along the side of the path when I arrived—a young woman this time who, as had others, silently stood up and walked ahead to the little village.

In the evening, when we sat around getting acquainted, someone asked, "Did you pass by that place where they are making a new road?"

Yes, indeed, that was the way I had come. That is, in fact, why it got so late; the men who worked there had to clear a path so that my car could pass.

"Is it true," someone else asked, "that there is a machine there that does the work of a hundred men?"

I must have felt a sense of pride in our cleverness, our inventiveness, our machines. A machine that does the work of a hundred men—that well describes a bulldozer.

"Yes," I said, "there is such a machine there."

Long silence.

Then another person spoke up: "What do those hundred men do?"

It was my turn to be silent. I had never considered labor-saving devices from that point of view. What did those hundred people do who were displaced by one bulldozer? I did not know.

Today, the children of those hundred men probably work in an office, or they make shoes. Perhaps they made the computer I am working on now. It seems inevitable that machines will take over—or have taken over already—much of the labor that was done by people not too long ago.

We do not think much about what those hundred men do.

I did not know what to say. I had not thought about the hundred men. The ebb and flow of the gentle conversation around a tiny fire moved on to other subjects. We talked about a mysterious sickness, I remember, that had come to a neighboring settlement.

But the thought of those hundred men now out of work haunts me still.

What do those hundred men do?

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Not long after that I visited a Malay kampong. Malays are far from primitive; they accept many of the things of modern technology, although not Western culture itself. The Malay culture is coherent, complex, and complete, and is very much part of everyone's life.

Every place has its own uniqueness, but this village at first seemed so typical, so average that it was bland. Not much was going on when the driver and I arrived, shortly after midday. The houses looked much as one would expect

in this part of the country: Neglected, in need of repair, but not really decrepit yet. A few people were lounging around dreamily. A handful of children, half asleep on the fringes of the little group of adults, sat or lay in the dirt. Nobody showed any interest in us or even looked at us with curiosity as we came closer. No one came to greet us or to check us out. None of the children seemed awake or alert enough even to stare, as children will.

My driver and I were absorbed in the village's lethargy. I felt as if we were moving through thick molasses as we approached what looked like the hanging-out place, located—of course—under a big tree, the coolest spot at this time of day.

We silently merged into midday village life: hanging out, doing nothing. We mumbled some greeting. It was peaceful, certainly. It was too hot for mosquitoes—they would come later. Flies were not flying. There was no breeze—not a leaf was twitching. Even the spirits had gone elsewhere.

An hour or so later it began to feel cooler. A few children began to fuss. They disappeared to go their own mysterious ways. A middle-aged man next to me looked up, awake enough to ask where we came from. No one would ask what we were doing in the village. That was not the way of Malays, but it was polite to inquire where we were from. And slowly, very slowly, a conversation grew.

By pleasantly cool midafternoon, most of the village stood around us. We had explained where we were from, and in the process mentioned who we were. Now it would be their turn to tell us about themselves.

First, however, someone wanted to know the latest gossip from the capital. Was it true that a famous

politician had an affair with an even more famous movie star? I had a friend who goes to the kind of parties where politicians, famous movie stars, and foreigners mix, but even he would not have known whether that was just rumor—and nasty gossip at that—or whether there was truth to the story. Was it true, someone else asked, that the prime minister had gone on an extended visit to Europe, and would visit the queen? Yes, we assured them, that was definitely true. In fact, the PM had already met with the queen; the story, with their picture, was in all the papers this morning.

A sigh of wonder wafted over the group: *wahhhh!*

There almost certainly was at least one transistor radio in this village. A few people here probably could read the papers, but it would take a few days for newspapers to reach them. This was a poor village, off the beaten track, but they knew what was happening in the capital.

Few of the villagers were wearing traditional dress, although all of them wore sarongs, faded and threadbare as they might be. But there were also nylon shirts, some watches, even costume jewelry, and a hat that looked as if it had gone through at least one war.

There was not much to tell about the village, it seemed. They were just ordinary people—not much happened here. The only thing that might be different in this village was that an inventor lived here! Someone had invented a machine, they told us—and he lives right in the village. They said the word in English: *mah-tcheen*, adding a *t* to make the word sound more explosive, more aggressive.

There were probably not more than fifteen adults standing around, and I could not imagine any of them having invented a machine.

"No," a woman who stood at the back said, "he is not here, he does not leave his house very often. He is a recluse."

Another voice added, ". . . and he cannot hear, nor can he talk."

We all moved to visit this inventor who was a recluse and a deaf-mute. He lived in what was almost certainly the smallest and shabbiest house in the village. His wife met us, standing in front of the door to make clear that we were not welcome inside. The house was so small that we probably could not have stood up inside. She motioned for us to go next door to a small, barnlike structure. She was not deaf and she could speak, we learned later, but perhaps living with a deaf-mute husband had made her silent as well.

It was getting close to sunset and what light came into the barn came through the door and a few chinks in the walls. In the gloom we saw a structure of heavy beams and pulleys. The inventor stood aside to let us in, eyes downcast. He was a slight man, unusually thin even for someone in a poor village, as if he had been hungry for a long time.

He quickly motioned to his wife, and made some signs to a few of the women who were edging into the small space. Some of the women left.

I could not imagine what the machine would do, but it looked competent—strong, simple, almost new. The wood had not discolored yet, although in places it had worn smooth or perhaps had been polished.

The place was dark and parts of the machinery were behind a partition. When I studied the machine I saw pulleys, stout *sennit* (coconut fiber) ropes connecting a heavy beam of wood to heavy bamboo supports. I still could not imagine what the machine would do or what it was for. By now most of the villagers had come and were standing outside, waiting for the show to begin.

There was some mumbling and a bit of confusion when the inventor gave more hand signs and a few more women disappeared. Maybe ten minutes later—it was dark now; little oil lamps had been brought to light up the inside of the barn—the women returned, single file, each with a handful of unhulled rice.

Now I understood what the machine would do. The inventor had invented a mill!

Traditionally, each household hulls rice once a day. Without refrigeration food does not keep well in the hot, humid tropics. Raw, unhulled rice keeps better than rice that is hulled and ready to cook. A block of wood with a cup-shaped depression holds some unhulled rice; the pestle is a long wooden pole that pounds the hulls off the rice. Two, sometimes three women (or girls) take turns lifting the pole and letting it fall into the mortar, sometimes with some force. It is an ancient ritual; the movements of lifting and dropping are done with the whole body. Pounding rice looks almost like a dance. The pestle bonging into the mortar makes a wonderfully syncopated rhythm that fits the dance of the women, who often sing to accompany themselves. They obviously did not dislike this work—they usually smiled and laughed while lifting and letting fall the long pole.

I had thought of it as woman's work—just as getting water from the river, or from a standpipe, was woman's work, accompanied by much giggling and gossip sharing.

The mortar in the barn was considerably larger than those used by a household; the depression might hold as much as six or seven cups of rice. The pestle was the large beam I had seen sticking up into the dark

beam I had seen sticking up into the dark recesses under the roof; its bottom end was rounded and smooth, and thicker and much heavier than the poles used for one household.

The inventor stepped on a treadle and slowly the machine came to life. It took a few minutes to get the pestle to move up and fall down, but when its rhythm had been established, it became clear that one rather scrawny man could hull, in a few minutes, all the rice five or six families would need for a meal.

The demonstration lasted no longer than five minutes. The inventor proudly showed us a small bucketful of smoothly hulled rice, visibly cleaner, smoother, and whiter than ordinary village rice. I knew that it would take five or six households half an hour to hull that much rice, yet this had been hulled in a few minutes.

The onlookers waited for our comments. We oohed and aahed and exclaimed what a wonderful machine this was—wondering meanwhile why it was so obviously unused. The villagers were proud of the inventor in their midst but they did not use his invention.

Here was genuine native genius at work: a laborsaving device invented by a simple, almost certainly illiterate villager. Even from this simple demonstration it was clear that this slight man could easily have hulled all the rice needed each day for the whole village in less than half an hour a day. That would leave all the women and girls who now did their daily rice-pounding dance with nothing to do but . . .

Obviously the women did not think of hulling rice as a chore, as hard or unpleasant work. Perhaps it was something they looked forward to doing. It was part of the daily rhythm of life.

Nobody in the village seemed to work hard, or to work long hours—except perhaps during the short, intense days of planting and harvesting rice. The activities that kept the people in this village alive—getting firewood for a little cooking, hulling rice, planting, tending the rice fields, fishing occasionally, growing some vegetables—all these were not thought of as work; it was what they did each day. Together these activities made the rhythm of their lives, a pleasant routine, essentially unchanged for many generations. They felt no need to change.

As we walked outside I asked the inventor's wife whether the inventor had seen pictures of a similar machine in a book. She obviously did not know what I was talking about. I doubted that she or he had ever seen a book with schematic drawings of anything like that mill. So I asked her how he had thought of making his machine. She paused for a moment, then she went inside the little house and came back with two handfuls of crude models made of pieces of bamboo, twigs, and string, each mounted on a piece of cardboard.

The inventor had invented by making and trying out scaled-down models; he had discovered the principle of moving a large upright beam with a small force. The models looked childishly crude compared to the finished product. It was hard to imagine that the models would work. But the finished product certainly did.

It was quite dark as we walked back to the car, followed by the adults and many of the children. They asked again how we liked the demonstration. Was this not a wonderful invention? Yes, we agreed, it was indeed a wonderful invention. The fact that it was not used obviously did not

lessen its value to them. The villagers perhaps thought of the inventor and his invention as we might think of an artist and his art: not useful, but something to be proud of, something we might display in a museum.

One day we may put our bulldozers in museums.