

The Extensions of a Sinhala Village*

by

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A peasant socio-economic system does not function in total isolation. Even in closed and isolable peasant systems characteristic patterns of extensions determine the nature of interaction with the outside world. The object of this paper is to examine the extensions of a Dry Zone hill country village in Sri Lanka. This theme is important as it brings into focus the part played by social and economic institutions in regulating the pattern of extensions in peasant communities.

The Setting

Halambagahawatte is located in the Matale district of the Dry Zone hill country of Sri Lanka. The Dry Zone is defined as the region with a rainfall of less than 508 mm for the Southwest monsoon (May - September) period. The figures for Naula show that during this period the rainfall received is only 402, mm. The seasonality of rainfall is indicated by the fact that 34.9 percent of the annual fall is received in the Northeast monsoon period (December - February). The village, which has a total of ninety-four households is located in a valley drained by the *Ma oya* (stream) - a left - bank tributary of the *Amban ganga* (river). The accessibility of the village is curtailed by the ridges that surround the village in the North, West and the East. It is, therefore, evident that Halambagahawatte as much as its neighbours Bambaragahawatte, Pubbiliya and Dambagolla is remotely located in relation to the outside world. The *Ma oya* which flows from North to South makes communication relatively easy in this direction. A cart track links Halambagahawatte to a minor road at Pubbiliya. The minor road follows the course of the river and joins the Naula - Elahera road at Kongahawela. There are footpaths leading away from Halambagahawatte toward the North and East. The *Ma oya* is given to wide seasonal fluctuations and during heavy rains wheeled traffic is impeded thus effecting the temporary isolation of Halambagahawatte.

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Social Extensions

Caste, kin and marriage are important elements of Sinhala social organization and the social dynamics pertaining to these are important determinants of extra - village extensions. Investigations at Halambagahawatte revealed that there is a general tendency towards village endogamy. Because of the smallness of the population, the 'ideal' of village endogamy cannot in every instance be met; thus marriage outside the village becomes a real necessity. The fact that patrilocal (*diga*) marriage is considered the norm results in a high stability of the male population vis-a-vis the female population; the women are far more mobile because they are either brought in, or given out, in marriage. This tendency finds further articulation because matrilocal (*binna*) marriage is rarely found among those interviewed at Halambagahawatte. Thus the chance of a Halambagahawatte woman remaining in her natal village by contracting a matrilocal marriage to an outsider is remote. It is also claimed that few Halambagahawatte men have out-migrated by contracting matrilocal marriages. It is argued that the general absence of matrilocal marriage is to be explained by the ecological situation relating to Halambagahawatte. Tambiah (1958) suggests that,

'there is a tendency for *binna* marriage to take place more frequently among the economically depressed than among the affluent. To be more precise, where a man is landless he may manage to marry a wife rather better off than himself.'

The absence of matrilocal marriage among the landless at Halambagahawatte is a measure of the importance of *hen* (land rotation) activity in the village economy i.e. even the landless could subsist by *hēn* cultivation. Besides, paddy by virtue of being rainfed is of secondary importance. Thus even those owning paddy land subsist, primarily on *hēn*. In this sense, therefore, there is very little economic differentiation within the village. The structural insignificance of paddy cultivation in the peasant economy again exerts a negative impact on those males from outside who desire to contract matrilocal marriages from Halambagahawatte.

An examination of the characteristics arising from extra-village marriage extensions brings out two clearly marked features. Despite the fact that table I indicates several villages with which Halambagahawatte is linked by ties of marriage, there is a high intensity of relationships with the two villages, Kalundewa and Pabbiliya; and the geographical dispersion of the villages show that they are located within 138 km from Halambagahawatte. Tambiah (1965) has observed a similar tendency in relation to Rambukkoluwa village in Matale district. It is argued that the spatially circumscribed pattern of social relationships is determined by the geographical factor. The hilly

terrain prevents easy communication within the region; thus the spatially circumscribed social field enables the maintenance of effective social relationships among particular groups of villages, with the minimum of effort. Within the spatially circumscribed social field the intensity of relationships among particular villages is socially determined. Thus caste and sub-caste alignments are of particular importance. Caste is based on a system of status gradation and is an important institution in the peasant scale of values (Ryan, 1953). The term sub-caste refers to status variations within castes. The marriage ties established within a closed kinship network results in a high incidence of cross-cousin marriage. Apart from the economic dimension involved in cross-cousin marriage it is also viewed as 'a mechanism for reinforcing already existing relationships' (Tambiah, 1958).

It is important to note the pattern of extensions between Halambagahawatte and the 'low caste' villages in the neighbourhood. The 'low castes' provide essential service - ritual functions in the religio-economic life of Halambagahawatte and this results in a characteristic pattern of interaction (Table 2). It is, however, evident that traditional constraints control the dynamics of inter-caste interaction. Thus a clearly discernible pattern emerges:

- (a) inter-caste interaction occurs in response to specific demands at specific times;
- (b) it is a highly formalized relationship - a superior inferior attitude is the rule;
- (c) the rules forbid commensality; and
- (d) the services are paid for either in cash or in kind.

It is evident that the pattern of social interaction is more oriented towards intra-village than inter-village interaction. Because, patrilocal marriage is the 'norm' the male population is highly stable. Further, the high incidence of intra-village marriage also restricts the mobility of a large section of the female population. Halambagahawatte, therefore, maintains an intensive rather than an extensive pattern of social interaction.

The pattern of social extensions described above can be explained in the form of a model (Figure 1). The village functions as a closed social unit, with very little contact with the outside world. The most intense relationships are formed within the village. Socio-ritual occasions lead to an extension in social relationships and interaction results. All such interaction takes place within limits imposed by the traditional value system. The closed nature of society and the socio-ritual occasions exercise a 'feedback' influence on the traditional value system.

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Economic Extensions

The agricultural - subsistence economy of Halambagahawatte pivots on *hēn* cultivation. This essentially means a system of land rotation rather than shifting cultivation (Perera, 1965). The cultivation of paddy under rainfed conditions plays a supplemental role in the village economy. The practice of *hēn* cultivation is given to polyculture but the distinction that Harris (1972) draws between swidden systems involving root and vegetable cultural systems is largely inapplicable in Halambagahawatte; the typical *hēna* is, in fact, a combination of both types.

The economic extensions of Halambagahawatte are examined here in relation to land tenure, labour and markets (Figure 2).

The Sinhala system of property inheritance is bilateral (Leach, 1960). In Halambagahawatte the position is similar. As Tambiah (1958) rightly points out it leads to dispersal in property rights i.e., the patrilocally (*diga*) married women take away with them the rights to property in their natal village. It is, therefore, evident that the traditional inheritance system gives rise to a pattern of extensions resulting from dispersed rights to property. Experience at Halambagahawatte shows that there is both a spatial and an economic dimension to such interaction. It is argued that the function of traditional institutional mechanisms is to circumscribe interaction both in its spatial and economic dimensions. The rules of bilateral inheritance, however, do not apply to *hēn* principally because it is based on a system of communal tenure. Technically all *hēn* land is owned by the State.

The spatial limits relating to ownership of land is determined first by the high incidence of intra-village marriage. Thereby the rights to property though dispersed are retained within the village. Secondly, the institution of cross-cousin marriage is also a determining factor. If marriage is from outside i.e. extra-village, the high incidence of cross-cousin marriage tends to limit the choice of villages from which marriage is possible thus preventing the wide dispersal in property rights. Indeed, cross-cousin marriage is an institutionalized means of property consolidation.

Economically, institutionalized arrangements restrict interaction to a minimum in the actual management and cultivation of land owned by non-resident owners. Two institutional devices are of general importance in Halambagahawatte. Thus there is a form of tenure (*gan-ande*) whereby land held by a patrilocally married (hence non-resident) woman in her village of birth is worked by her resident siblings; under this arrangement she is entitled to a half-share of the produce. In practice this system entails little

interaction. A second arrangement involves the exchange of plots between residents of Halambagahawatte and that of other villages connected by ties of marriage. Several variables come into play in the actual operation of the system.

- (a) The distance factor: It is more usual for this system to operate when distance prevents easy contact between villages.
- (b) The extent of the land: The properties exchanged should be of comparable extent.
- (c) The ecological factors of terrain and water supply etc: The peasant recognizes 'good quality' land and 'bad quality' land and the physical properties of the plots exchanged should be of comparable quality.

The divisive effects of a pattern of bilateral inheritance continued over generations result in uneconomic fragmented holdings; another tendency is for landlessness to increase. Given such a situation it is reasonable to expect an external orientation in economic interests among both the landless and holders of uneconomic units. In Halambagahawatte, however, the opposite is the case; even those with little or no assets retain their economic interests in the village. This is to be explained by,

- (a) the tenurial systems which make a distinction between the unit of ownership and the unit of production. These arrangements assist in making the production units more viable. The institutional arrangements referred to above provide good examples; in addition, there are other arrangements countering the divisive effects of inheritance. Thus *tattumaru* tenure prevents sub-division beyond a point by rotating the cultivation rights among several owners. Similarly various share-cropping arrangements neutralize discrepancies in the ownership pattern;
- (b) the abundance of *hēn* land permits even those without ownership rights to paddy land subsist without difficulty thus preventing an external orientation in economic interests.

In regard to labour mobility there is again a traditional pattern of extensions. Thus there is the occasional flow of labour to outlying villages to assist kinsmen in agricultural work. Such assistance is usually reciprocated. However, the general pattern is for the intra-village utilization of the available supply of labour. The similarity in the agricultural work cycle restricts labour mobility among different villages because during 'peaks' the tendency in each village is to utilize all available labour within the village itself. The traditional *attam* and *kaiya* institutions provide the mechanism for the mobilization of labour within the village. It is, however, important to note the distinction

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between the two institutions; *attam* refers to reciprocal exchange of labour. The institution of *kaiya* on the contrary is a form of long term interdependence i.e. there is no immediate return of assistance given or received. It is usually a system of helping out fellow villagers who are unable to work the fields themselves e.g., in the event of sickness or death in the family. The mobility of labour is further subject to caste control. Thus even in a situation where labour is mobile, caste differences have to be observed and this prevents the flow of labour from Halambagahawatte to the 'low caste' villages in the neighbourhood. It is, however, possible for 'low caste' labour to flow into Halambagahawatte. The demand and supply situation prevalent within 'high caste' villages exercise a regulatory control on this form of labour mobility.

The operation of the *hen* and paddy based systems of agriculture has contributed to make Halambagahawatte a closed economic unit. Thus the peasant has minimal market relations. There are other factors too which tend to minimize the market orientation of the peasant. First, limited surplus is available above subsistence needs. Secondly, agriculture is rainfed and fluctuation in production is a common occurrence. Therefore, the peasant is compelled to participate in various forms of redistributive and reciprocal exchange (Shalins, 1965). The internal exchange mechanisms lend stability to the social system. Thirdly, ecological similarity prevents specialized exchange opportunities at the inter village level. However, it should not be inferred that the peasant has absolutely no market involvement. He is indeed compelled to sell small quantities of his produce to obtain essentials of daily life such as salt, sugar, dried fish, cloth or luxuries such as kerosene lamps, radios, etc. The buying and selling is done at the periodic market at Kongahawala and Naula. Naula has the added advantage of being an important 'urban centre' servicing the rural communities of the region.

Patterns of Change

The impact of modernization is increasingly being felt in Halambagahawatte. The minor road motorable upto Pabbiliya, is bringing in increased motor traffic and with it greater accessibility to markets. A regular bus service now connects Halambagahawatte with Naula and the outside world. Pabbiliya and Kongahawela are both emerging as small scale service centres of the region. The government hospital is at Kongahawela; the school, co-operative store and the post office are found at Pabbiliya. Halambagahawatte in common with other villages of the neighbourhood now has necessarily to look to Pabbiliya and Kongahawela for essential services. The impact of these changes is two fold. On the one hand there is increasing interaction between Halambagahawatte and the neighbouring villages. On the other there is the widening of the geographical area of operation of the

peasant resulting from an increased accessibility to markets and urban centres. It is, therefore, evident that external pressure is bringing about significant changes in the traditional pattern of extensions. The rate of change in the pattern of extensions, however, will depend on the extent to which the socio-economic system itself is transformed by the factors of change.

Conclusions

The following points emerge from the present study:

- (a) The interaction of traditional socio-economic institutions determine the pattern of extensions;
- (b) The pattern of extensions is spatially circumscribed and hence tends to be intensive rather than extensive;
- (c) Increasing external pressure is introducing significant changes into the traditional pattern of extensions.

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TABLE 1

AFFINAL VILLAGES AND DISTANCES

Village	Linear distance in kilometres from Halambagahawatte
Pubbiliya	12
Kalundewa	40
Maragamuwa	40
Lenadora	60
Kongahawela	72
Elagamuwa	88
Opalgala	136

Source : field survey.

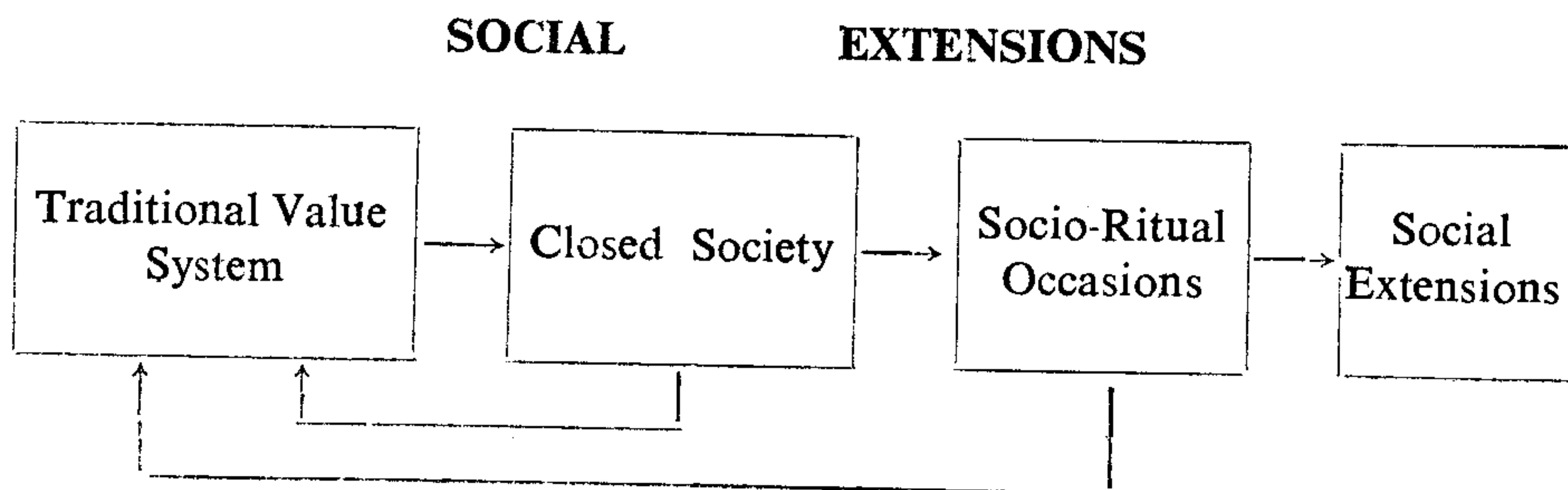
TABLE 2

CASTE FUNCTIONS

Caste	Service - Ritual Function
Gurunnehela	Makers of agricultural implements
Hena	Provide white linen and various caste-determined services on ritual occasions.
Hewayya	Carriers of goods
Pandithayo	Suppliers of pots for domestic use and ritual functions.
Pannikki	Tom-tom beating on magico - religious occasions.

Source : field survey.

Fig. 1



ECONOMIC EXTENSIONS

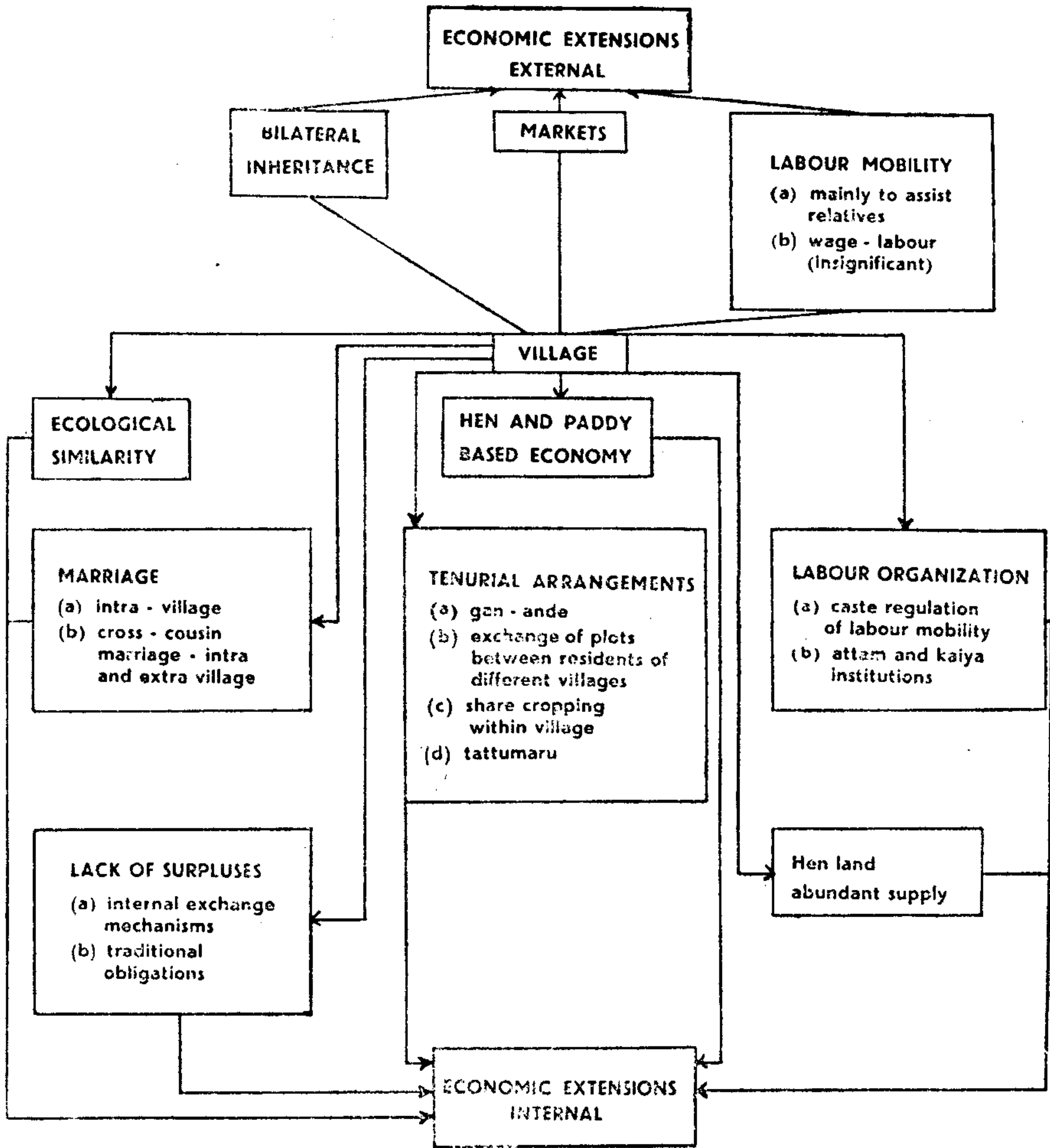


Fig. 2