

R. A. Cramb. *Land and Longhouse: Agricultural Transformation in the Uplands of Sarawak*. (NIAS Monographs Vol. 110) Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2007, 450p.

Shifting cultivation, the land use that relies on fallowing agricultural fields after their use for intensive cultivation to restore conditions for agricultural production, has been condemned as being wasteful and backward as long as outsiders, colonial and central governments, began having interest in forests and lands where this mostly tropical agricultural technology was being used. In fact, however, shifting cultivation is but a stage in a process identified as agrarian transformation, in which land use in any given place is subject to forces of change and evolves over time. In his new book, *Land and Longhouse: Agricultural Transformation in the Uplands of Sarawak*, Rob Cramb presents an admirable overview of agriculture change in one upland region in the Saribas District where local Iban started settling somewhere in the 17th or 18th century. The original rice swiddening with which the Saribas Iban started, has now largely been replaced by market oriented pepper and rubber cultivation.

*Land and Longhouse* accounts in much detail how this change began as an endogenous process, at a time when the Brunei Sultan's influence was limited to collecting taxes at far away river posts. Saribas agriculture evolved from *pioneer* into *established* shifting cultivation due to progressive occupation of available land and the conversion of forest within single longhouse territories. The particular characteristics of upland shifting cultivation, including the risk of crop failures, the need to fallow land, and the threats from neighboring groups shaped tenure customs and related rights and obligations that characterized Iban agriculture at that time.

The forces that drove Saribas agrarian transformation changed fundamentally once James Brooks gained governorship of Sarawak in 1841. This period marks the true beginning of the community-market-state model that the book introduces to explain upland agrarian transformation. While the Brook regime imposed its will on the inland population and joined many others in condemning shifting cultivation, it also accepted important elements of Iban tenure customs and restrained commercial agriculture in the interior as it was considered detrimental to the rural population's wellbeing. Since the early 20th century, land pressure reached critical levels, causing changes in customary tenure arrangements. While disputes over land had been settled previously within or between the Iban longhouse communities, now state courts were given a large role in settling land or territorial conflicts.

While the Brook regime had yet a modest impact on agrarian change, market forces came to influence Saribas land use to great extent when farmers eagerly adopted rubber as a cash crop that can be grown as a substitute of swidden fallows. Rubber was complementary to rice production, and tapping could be adjusted depending on the need for cash and rubber prices. Customary tenure easily adjusted to accommodate commercial tree crops, which became recognized as private property. While this implied a progressive privatization of land ownership, longhouse territorial integrity was maintained. Together with rubber production, sharecropping and contract labor were innovative arrangements introduced into the Saribas region.

The Brook regime has been called an atypical colonial government, as it refrained from the explicit modernization or resource exploitation practices in other parts of the world, including neighboring peninsular Malaysia and Indonesia. This largely changed when the British Crown

took over the Sarawak Government. This period is the beginning of a pronounced State impact on agrarian transition. During British colonial rule, wet rice and rubber cultivation were promoted and swidden agriculture and encroachment into remaining forests restricted.

The full force of the state shaping agrarian transformation, however, only started after Sarawak had become part of Malaysia in 1963. Since the 1970s, the Sarawak Government began to embrace agrarian modernization and to this end strengthened its ties with business interests. State administration and modernization development policies were imposed on Sarawak's hinterlands. The very own Iban representatives within the Sarawak Government became staunch supporters of these policies and new clientelistic political cultures. The state set up a diverse number of agencies and programs, each of which envisioned a different role of Iban longhouse residents in the decision making and of customary land tenure. Legislation affecting land rights sometimes undermined customary tenure, but other times enforced it.

Market forces continued to intertwine with state policies, when pepper became the more lucrative cash crop and began to replace rubber since the 1970s. This implied a land use intensification that could have turned the Saribas landscape back to more forest cover as extensively managed rubber plots were replaced by much smaller areas of intensively managed pepper groves. However, the government interest in land development assured that abandoned rubber gardens and swidden fallows increasingly began to be turned into oil palm plantations, a crop promoted by the Sarawak Government and agricultural corporations.

The trends of the last decade lead to an unusual coexistence of customary tenure over longhouse territory in combination with private property over land under commercial tree crops

and estate crops controlled by private companies. One view that can be held is that the Saribas agrarian transformation has led to a decentralized land use decision. Much of the land is held under discretionary private property while the longhouse community has the mandate to assure that private or corporate interests do not jeopardize longhouse community interests. The longhouse territory is equivalent to municipal territories elsewhere, and is subject to the longhouse community control. The state steers local land use trends through its legislation and policies and links with corporate interest, but is curtailed because a fair degree of longhouse autonomy that is safeguarded by the courts. This configuration is not unlike other tropical forest regions that have experienced devolution and decentralization in recent decades, even though the pathways have been very different.

The *Land and Longhouse* volume suggests a model that describes the forces that shape and the variables that characterize tropical forest upland agrarian transformation. Crops, land cover, technology, labor arrangements, but also customary tenure and an important degree of local autonomy characterize the process. Saribas land use became progressively incorporated into the fangs of world markets and state legislation and policies. This is a fate that few locations in the world escape. The tropical forest upland conditions put borders on Saribas agrarian transformation, but the process is equally influenced by Iban resource and tenure cultural heritage. While the Brook regime took a position that gave much space to this cultural heritage, quite unusual among 19th and 20th century colonial regimes, the Malaysian state applied more rigid and commanding agrarian modernization and rural development policies.

The volume presents an impressive amount of information on two centuries of agrarian

transformation in one confined tropical forest region, something that few other volumes have achieved in similar detail. The volume suffers a few shortcomings, though. The introductory chapter provides an excellent overview on the various conceptual and theoretical discussions that need to be called upon for the analysis of the book. The concluding sections of most chapters comment on these various issues, but there is no grand discussion of the implications of the Saribas case for the various theoretical debates. The Saribas case is compared to other upland Asian cases only in the last chapter, but little consolidated conclusions are drawn and the comparison appears rather an afterthought. These shortcomings are unfortunate, as their omitting would have made this volume a true great scholarly work.

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Anders Poulsen. *Childbirth and Tradition in Northeast Thailand: Forty Years of Development and Cultural Change*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2007, xiii + 267p.

This book, written by a scholar who has long worked in the field of child psychology, describes the customs and traditions related to pregnancy and childbirth and their changes over 40 years in Northeast Thailand. The essence of this volume is the detailed and specific data deriving from the author's longitudinal research from 1961 to 2005 in a village in Udon Thani Province. Through this full description, the author presents a different perspective about classification of the rituals of pregnancy and childbirth from the one proposed by Stanley J. Tambiah, whose description of the religious practices in Northeast Thailand has had great impact on Thai studies.

This volume is organized in two main parts. The first part consists of six chapters and highlights the beliefs and practices relating to pregnancy and childbirth. Chapter one gives an outline of village life. The author was involved in a UNESCO-funded project with Tambiah, and conducted his first-time fieldwork in a "Laotian" Thai rice farming village. Through description from the earlier fieldwork, readers are informed that all treatment of the sick used to be done by ritual experts and herbal doctors—moreover, home delivery was "natural"—however, after a Health Centre was built by the government in 1987, the whole village has been gradually penetrated by modern medical care.

Chapter two explains traditional beliefs about birth in the village by reporting voices from village elders, ritual masters and midwives. In the 1960s, two kinds of rituals were directly influential upon the course of a normal childbirth. One was the ceremony for pregnant women called *suukhwan maemaan*. This ceremony is related to the belief of the fleeting soul called the *khwan*. It is believed that *khwan* remains with a person and keeps her/his body and mind comfortable. Each healthy individual without handicap has 32 *khwans*, each located in specific parts of the body. Therefore, it is essential to tie the *khwan* to the person's body on important occasions in the person's life. The other was the ceremony of protecting the fetus or the newborn baby against the evil spirit called *kae kamlerd*. When a newborn baby does not drink its mother's milk or is fretful, it is caused by the spirit called *mae kamlerd*. This spirit is understood to be the "previous mother" from the child's previous life, and she appears to take back her child. For that reason, it is said traditionally that the *kae kamlerd* ought to be performed before birth to free the baby from the threat of *mae kamlerd*. Tambiah classifies these two rituals on pregnancy and childbirth as *khwan*