

*Land and Longhouse: Agrarian Transformation in the Uplands of Sarawak.* By R.A. Cramb. Denmark: Nias Press, 2007. 442 pp.

Over the past five decades, forested uplands and lowlands in South-east Asia have served as important sites for anthropologists to study the livelihood of indigenous communities facing social changes and economic development. In Sarawak, the plight of its indigenous communities gained global attention over the timber blockades in 1987 which led to an attempted ban by the European Union on timber produced from “unsustainable” sources. Linked to the timber debate then was the impact of timber extraction and deforestation on the indigenous peoples’ livelihoods and their well-being. Also drawn into the debate was the impact of development and agricultural transformation on native subsistence and religious and cultural beliefs.

For Sarawak’s indigenous communities, their agricultural practices, foraging and hunting behaviour, and religious beliefs have been studied in great detail from the 1980s to the 1990s by notable anthropologists like Peter Kedit (on the Iban in Lubok Antu and Paku); S.C. Chin (on the Kenyah Community in Long Selatong Ulu in Baram); J. Peter Brosius (on the Penan Community in Sarawak’s Seventh Division); Henry Luhah (on the Kajang in the Belaga District); Ida Nicolaisen (on the Punan Bah in Long Bah at the Rejang River); and Sylvester Punchak (on the Bisaya at the Limbang River). Most of these works were published in the *Sarawak Museum Journal*, considered an authoritative and informative source of information.

Cramb, however, approaches the study of the indigenous Iban from the perspective of an agricultural economist. The Iban form the largest single ethnic group in Sarawak and western Borneo, and about 630,000 are grouped into around 6,000 longhouse communities. Hence the focus of Cramb’s study is significant in that it studies the largest ethnic group in Sarawak, serving to highlight the dynamics influencing change and conflict of this particular group in light of modernization, the introduction of new forms of agrarian practices, and the intrusion of large-scale commercial activities into a traditional system of land ownership and shifting cultivation.

Chapter One deals with general agrarian transformation movements and the theories associated with such transformation. The next chapter relates theory to the ground by looking at the Sarawakian Iban communities, and then narrowing the focus to a particular group of Iban in the Saribas uplands. Subsequent chapters deal with various thematic issues in a chronological order during the Brooke and post-war period.

The pre-colonial agrarian system of the Saribas Iban, notably shifting cultivation and Iban customs related to land tenure and its use, is discussed in Chapter Three. The Brooke State, and its attitude towards Iban land cultivation practices and customs is dealt with in Chapter Four. The struggle for land by the Iban during the Brooke period is explored in Chapter Five (the Government from then on viewed land as subject to state proprietorship and has, in effect, overridden many individual indigenous land rights). Chapter Six deals with the growth of commercial agriculture during the Brooke period, while Chapter Seven deals with the adaptation of land tenure to commercial agriculture.

In the post-war period, the issues covered include agrarian law and policy discussed in Chapter Eight, public and private agents of agrarian development in the uplands in Chapter Nine, post-war transformation of smallholder agriculture in the Saribas District in Chapter Ten, and land tenure and development in the same district in Chapter Eleven. Chapter Twelve concludes by discussing the need to achieve a balanced development in the Southeast Asian uplands.

Right at the onset, Cramb lays down the theoretical framework of his work by referring to works by Karl Polyani, Marx, Boserup, Geertz, and Myint to centre his discussion on issues on agricultural transformation, displacement, and economic development. However, Cramb also points out that no grand theory of agricultural transformation can be applied to the Iban. Rather he posits questions to examine the realities of the customary systems of land use and tenure by the Iban, why such systems have persisted into the current era, and how these systems have adapted to accommodate population growth, economic globalization and other economic and social trends.

Cramb also links micro level questions to the macro issues of political economy by asking what the basis of the widespread conflict between the indigenous communities, corporate agricultural and timber interests, and the state is. Was conflict an inevitable result of the pursuit of economic development? What could have been done to achieve a more balanced outcome between development and agricultural transformation?

In Sarawak, government land development schemes involving commercial agriculture and logging activities in general have tended to result in conflict. This has been highlighted in many of the studies on Sarawak and its indigenous peoples. Hence an important lesson that can be drawn from Cramb's study is the need for an improved understanding of indigenous practices, customs, and beliefs to help resolve conflicts "over the trajectory of rural development and resource management in Sarawak ... where issues of land use and tenure remain hotly contested" (p. 6). In this aspect, Cramb's work succeeds greatly in pointing out the dissonance between the interests and concerns of indigenous peoples against the modern corporate agricultural entity encouraged and supported by the state.

The study focuses on the period roughly from the middle of the nineteenth century to the close of the twentieth century. The Saribas Iban have been notable in Sarawak's economic and political development, from their early bloody encounters with the Rajah James Brooke in the 1840s, to their modern involvement with commercial agriculture, education, government bureaucracy, and electoral politics (p. 5).

Cramb's study is unique in that it looks at the Iban land-use system over a long time period, capturing the changes that have occurred in the context of unprecedented population growth, the extension of transportation and global markets to the remote rural hinterlands, the introduction and spread of new agricultural crops and technologies, and the increasing reach and power of the modern state into the livelihood of its communities in the interiors.

In the 1850s, the agrarian system of the Iban was characterized by the shifting cultivation of upland rice and other food crops,

primarily for subsistence needs, and a customary or community-based system of land tenure or *adat*. By 2000, land use was dominated by the cultivation of perennial commercial crops like pepper, rubber, and oil palm with shifting cultivation declining to become a minor activity. New systems of tenure have also emerged with formal individualized tenure (officialized titles), corporate forms of tenure within government-sponsored and commercial land development schemes now co-existing with customary tenure.

The traditional Iban conceptions of land tenure have only increasingly come into conflict with the process of modernization as Sarawak government policies promote extensive commercial logging and plantation development on lands claimed by the Iban and by other Sarawak indigenous communities against their consonant norms. Commercial agricultural policies seen as the panacea for eradicating the “backwardness” of such communities were often inconsistent with traditional Iban land tenure and were not complementary and mutually rewarding to the interests of the indigenous communities.

However, the rise of an “aggressively high-modernist patrimonial state” with the advent of the Rahman government in the 1970s, and taken to excessive lengths by the Taib government from 1981, radically shifted the balance of power between indigenous communities and the state. The state now aligning with a new class of market actors — “corporatised plantation agencies and private plantation companies eager to exploit Sarawak’s apparently vacant lands and the rising profitability of oil palm” (p. 363). This also resulted in the imminent exhaustion of Sarawak’s forest reserves, previously the major source of political patronage for the Sarawak government in which the chief minister, his family, and cronies owned large tracts of forest concession areas in the state.

The Iban previously involved in the Sarawak Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority model of palm oil development in 1976, where they gained access to capital and technology while retaining both individual and community land rights, now saw their interests increasingly sidelined under these newer corporatized and private plantation companies in the 1980s and 1990s under the Taib government.

Community and public land for private plantation development was henceforth appropriated on an unprecedented scale, redistributing wealth to favoured clients in the political and economic elite (p. 364). For example, some plantation companies were only interested in the private development of state land, not in line with the concerns and interests of the indigenous people living in those areas. These companies were also linked to Sarawak's business and political elite.

*Land and Longhouse* by Robert Cramb is not a book that romanticizes the lives of the indigenous communities in Sarawak, Malaysia, in light of modernization and development. Rather, it is a vigorous study of the historic transformation of the Iban, the largest ethnic group in Sarawak, and of their system of agricultural practices over a period of one hundred and fifty years. *Land and Longhouse* provides important lessons for governments, academics, and policy planners who want to understand the processes of agricultural transformation and development in this modern day and age.

All in all, this publication provides invaluable information for researchers and policy-makers interested in commercial agricultural development and its implications on indigenous communities from a political economy perspective. Cramb presents a clear discussion of the issues involved, the impact on the Saribas Iban of modernization and development over several decades, and how their community has transformed over time. Cramb also provides invaluable insights into how agricultural transformation endeavours should be approached in order to minimize the attendant conflicts and tensions associated with developing lands for commercial agriculture. In this sense, this book represents an important contribution to the literature on agricultural transformation and the impact it has on indigenous communities in Southeast Asia, and should be read by individuals interested in such issues.

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