

“The Family in a Changing Agricultural Economy: A Longitudinal Study of an East Sabah Village”. By Elizabeth Whinfrey-Koepping. Working Paper no. 47, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1988. Pp. 27.

Although there are many studies on village communities, only a few can be labelled as “longitudinal studies” which focus on the family and economy in a community over a long time. This working paper of Whinfrey-Koepping, a study of a village over a century, is one of these rarer studies.

The case-study is based on the author’s “residence and anthropological field-work in one community carried out between 1966 and 1986 in the lower Labuk valley of east Sabah, Malaysia, and on records kept by the Chartered Company, which administered the territory between 1882 and 1946, and the Colonial Office, London, which fulfilled the same task until 1963” (p. 1). This community was established in 1923 by several different groups, most of whom were Kadazan who initially came from the middle Labuk.

Whinfrey-Koepping contends that “family and economy, while embedded in one cultural, historical and ecological milieu, takes its particular shape from circumstances and events, both inside and outside, at a specific time. The result is a continual negotiation between these constraints, a continual gamble in the dark (lack of full knowledge being the lot of peasant and pioneer just as it is of professional and politician) between what is objectively feasible, culturally possible, and economically rational” (p. 24). The argument is explicated from three points of view, namely, economic rationality, cultural acceptability, and history. In the last century, people from the village lived in the jungle and their economic mainstay was the sale of jungle products when the price was right. Planting was a side job which filled in the troughs in trade activities. “They wanted rice, but could not grow much, wanted brasses for marriage, but could not obtain these if they had only potatoes for sale; other people grew more rice more successfully” (p. 24). Indeed this was one of the main reasons why they migrated to the present site of the community. In this middle Labuk community, land was owned by either sex and the expected pattern was one of reasonable equity between the sexes in regard to land and to production. Most families,

according to the author, live uxorilically after marriage while a great number of women had close local ties of kinship and friendship. The most interesting overriding value in this community was that of balance (*mi-timbang*) between individuals, between groups, and between people and the natural world (p. 3). This balance was upset after World War II when Sabah was transferred to the Colonial Office. Men left the village to work in timber camps, leaving their wives to produce rice on their own. There was little family life and that made for marital tension, frequent distrust, and resentment. Family life was affected more radically in 1974 when a sudden influx of unemployed husbands, brought about by a recession in the timber industry, created social and economic tension in the community. These unemployed people fitted poorly into the community and were not essentially needed in the rice economy. Besides, during these years the harvest of rice was poor due to worsening soil fertility, pests, and bad timing of the planting cycle. This resulted in much quarrelling within families during this period and there was an unprecedented level of domestic violence. The author observes that the community, while strong in corporate feeling albeit riven with anger and envy, was usually tense and depressed as people continued to plant the soil and reap their meagre crop (p. 12).

During the 1980s, there were two important events which changed the life of this middle Labuk community. The village was designated by the government as a "model" kampong during 1980-83, and thus many employment opportunities were available. As men took a variety of jobs and several attended universities overseas, they seemed to gain a new control within the family which was not part of the usual balance of the sexes so typical of Kadazan communities. On the other hand, the women lost their economic control for they became less productive and were not tangibly adding to the family wealth. The author argues that the extra cash earned by husbands led to a swift reduction in rice cultivation, for women could afford to spend more time on unproductive activities. But this pattern turned out to be short-lived since very swift changes in economic conditions once again led the community back to its devices during 1984 and 1986 when timber-camp employment ceased completely and the government development project intended to increase the amount of land under rice failed. This resulted in both women and men working together in the rice fields and thus renewed the sense of co-operation and equity between spouses. Besides,

the completion of a road link to the main coastal town in 1983 altered the settlement pattern, which over the years had been one of increasing concentration. Some people moved out of the village and built small houses near rough roads within a radius of 15 miles of the village (p. 15). The author also found that the main post-war trend in production, from dry to wet rice cultivation, has been reversed for the reason that wet rice cultivation needs child labour and almost all the children now go to school. But the author observes that the community as a whole was not the same in terms of familial roles as it had been and that the ideology of male supremacy might no longer hold in the public arena (p. 17). There seems to be enough evidence to suggest that changes in agriculture and family relations affect each other and that there was considerable flexibility in both the economic and the family pattern. But it seems that economic changes are caused essentially by infrastructural changes (or the impact of contact with the town?) rather than by changes in agriculture or, for that matter, technological changes in agriculture (except, perhaps, the introduction of some new varieties of rice).

The author concludes that the disruption of locally acceptable role patterns within the sphere of familial relations and of gender expectations through both outside forces and internal responses led to a degree of imbalance which was personally and culturally unacceptable. She points out that returning life to an acceptable pattern involved reaching a more equable economic balance between spouses in accordance with Kadazan expectations, and an altered infracture, with its potential to alleviate or obviate quarrels. One important conclusion is that economic and political conditions do not necessarily create or determine cultural patterns but rather interact with them (p. 26).

For a working paper, the author's contribution in this area is noteworthy and illuminating. A good monograph along the lines of this study could be produced if the author were able to include more field data (which she presumably has) accompanied by a more detailed analysis, as well as some discussion of, for example, technological change and its impact on the village economy and the implications for changing cultural patterns in the community.

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