

*The Heritage of Traditional Agriculture among the Western Austronesians.* Edited by James J. Fox. Occasional Paper, Department of Anthropology. Published in association with the Comparative Austronesian Project. Canberra: Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1992. Pp. iv, 89.

Five people contributed to this collection of essays, including the editor. The main theme has to do with rice, particularly swidden cultivation of rice and the ritual significance of the crop. The traditional agriculture of various societies from Borneo to Timor is thought to have embodied in it “a common Austronesian heritage”, which is being continually enriched by “the adoption of new cultigens and by the development of the new modes of production” (p. 1). The papers, previously presented at a conference in Yogyakarta in 1990, are written by James J. Fox (who has also written the introduction), Christine Helliwell, Timothy C. Jessup, Kusnaka Adimihardja, and E.D. Lewis.

Despite the common theme, the contributors write on a wide range of topics within the broad understanding of a traditional food production system, with each paper being given individual emphasis by the writer. Readers who go through this volume will realize that the discussion varies from whether swidden agriculture is an economically and ecologically sound practice in contrast to wet-rice cultivation, to whether a specific method of rice cultivation is in fact the underlying factor serving to perpetuate ethnic identity and consciousness.

Helliwell, for instance, takes very seriously the choice of the Gerai Dayak community in West Kalimantan to adhere to swidden cultivation, even though it may prove economically disadvantageous, because doing so helps them to differentiate themselves from Malays who are wet-rice cultivators — “swidden cultivation of rice serves as the marker of Gerai Dayak identity *vis-à-vis* the Malays” (p. 14). From there it follows that every step taken in the production of rice, from harvesting to the choice of place where trampling is to be done, to its final storage, involves symbolic acts aimed at differentiating them from the Malays, whom they see as representing a different order of beings, “one which refuses pork and rice wine” (p. 12) and whom they long detest

in the unequal relationship.

Jessup's contribution tells readers that swidden agriculture is widely practised among the Kenyah Dayak of Apo Kayan, although there is a marked change in the population distribution. As a result of population decrease, rules regarding traditional rights to land use tend to be less observed than it ought to be. There is now less competition for secondary forest for swidden use, while old growth forest is likely to be left alone. Farms also tend to get closer to the village than it used to be.

Kusnaka's paper deals with the intricacies of various rituals related to *huma* agricultural practice among the Kasepuhan of West Java. For the Kasepuhan, the *huma* itself very much embodies the concept of "house", both in the spiritual and spatial sense, which quite significantly incorporates the forest as well; hence the destruction of the forest would mean the destruction of their "house". For that reason every step taken in the opening of the forest involves the ritual offering of various kinds, all for the sake of maintaining harmony with nature, which is an integral part of the "house". According to Kusnaka, swidden agriculture for the Kasepuhan is not just a continuation of their ancestral tradition; "it is also a form of survival in which a particular social organization has been identified as the basis for living" (p. 34).

Lewis writes on the social order and the maintenance of the complex ecosystem in Tana 'Ai in Flores. Its human population is in itself the regulator of the ecosystem; women head the household and they are the ones who make the crucial decision with regard to the clearing of forest for cultivation. According to Lewis, this is a significant factor in the regulation and management of the Tana 'Ai agricultural ecosystem, since the choices and decisions are vested in the few female household heads. Men, however, still play an important role in the heaviest of the horticultural responsibilities, clearing forests, constructing fences, houses and granaries, that is, when they are not busy negotiating between exogamous houses. Despite the fact that women exercise control over the utilization of land, the men claim exclusive rights in maintaining the ceremonial system and ritual life of the community.

The contribution of Fox brings the readers on an odyssey of lexical terminologies about the terms used in the ritual complexes of the peo-

ple in the outer arc of the islands. By going through the ritual language in which ancestral knowledge is preserved, Fox tries to find clues in the earlier forms of agricultural reliance, which by now have been much influenced or even superseded by the introduction of a multitude of crops from distant and varied places. He takes us on a lexical journey to various islands, from Roti to Timor, to Sumba and Savu, to find evidence of an agricultural heritage whose ritual still focuses on a limited number of crops. It appears that in most places rice seems to occupy top position in the ritual hierarchy as a prestige crop, as well as as an essential food for feasting. It is the crop of great ritual significance even in areas where other crops are staple.

On the whole, the volume provides varied and interesting reading. Some readers may find the case presented by Helliwell very strongly put, and the argument that the Geraï's mode of rice production is a conscious marker of ethnicity, a little off the mark. Nevertheless, it reveals very clearly the underlying perceptions of the Dayaks towards the Malays. The contribution and analysis by Kusnaka adds to the wealth of materials on rituals and their significance in our understanding of the relationship between agricultural activities and the maintenance of the ecosystem. Although the contributions by Fox and Lewis are exploratory and speculative in nature, as both writers appear to modestly admit, the papers alert us to the importance and urgency of doing further research on many things that we tend to take for granted, a fast disappearing agricultural heritage being one of them.

As a coherent collection of essays, the volume, to quote Fox, provides "some sense of the rich diversity and historical complexity of traditional Austronesian agriculture". People who are interested in the ethnography of this region should read this book.

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