

Book review

Land and Longhouse: Agrarian Transformation in the Uplands of Sarawak by R.A. Cramb. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Monograph series No. 110. Published by Nias Press, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2007, pp. xxii + 422, ISBN 978 87 7694 010 2 (pbk).

This book breathes. It is an impressive scholarly work that pulses with the life of the Iban people, the largest of the majority Dayak indigenous population in Sarawak (a Malaysian State on the island of Borneo). Their agrarian systems combine the use of shifting cultivation of hill rice for subsistence food needs, along with the cultivation of commercial crops such as rubber and pepper. The underlying land tenure system combines a mixture of community and individual ownership. Rob Cramb takes the reader on a journey through history, going back to the sixteenth century when the Iban first migrated into the Saribas region, and ends in the twenty-first century with the government overturning or ignoring customary land rights in a push to develop large scale privately owned oil palm plantations.

The book is a culmination of Rob Cramb's experience as an agricultural economist in the country from 1977 to 1983, field work and archival research for his PhD, and subsequent field visits. After maintaining his interest in Sarawak over a number of decades, Rob Cramb rose to the call 'you have abandoned us!' (p. xvii), reflecting the Iban struggle to explain and defend their customs and practices in an increasingly sceptical and hostile policy environment. He sees his role as helping in a small way to explain the functioning of their evolving agrarian system to the wider world (p. xvi). This helps to explain the focus of the book on the people and not just their practices. Cramb provides the reader with a unique and eclectic insight into the transformation of Iban livelihood systems.

The book is set out in three main historical periods, beginning in pre-colonial times when the Iban were famous for their aggressive migration into new territories. But eventually population pressure in the Saribas region limited the opportunities for further migration and Iban agrarian systems started on a process of adaptability and change.

In the colonial period from the 1850s to the Second World War, Sarawak had the unique experience of being governed by a succession of three individuals from the Brooke family in Britain, known as the White Rajahs. This was a period of rather benign rule, but with the traditional British propensity for bureaucracy and extensive record keeping. Cramb illustrates his description of Iban land tenure systems with examples from Court records going back 150 years. However, the Brooke governments did recognise native customary rights to land but, unfortunately for the current generation, few specific land titles were ever registered.

The third, post-war period, is an era when the State extends its influence into the remote rural areas. At first there was strong support for smallholder agriculture

and government subsidy schemes underpinned the move into pepper production. However, from the 1970s the rise of an aggressively high-modernist, patrimonial state, radically shifted the balance between community and state (p. 363). By the 1990s the State was promoting the expansion of large scale plantation agriculture run by private corporations on 'State' land where Native Customary Rights had been established but never registered or secured under formal title.

The Iban move into cash crop production (rubber) in the Brooke era, and then more recently into pepper production, was met with a corresponding move to more permanent and private forms of land ownership. However, the response to the growing pressure on land access within a community was not uniform across the region and this is where Cramb's case study comparison of the two longhouse communities provides such a useful basis of analysis. In one case, when land shortages existed within a household, individual tenure and succession was still maintained. Some individuals were able to use land belonging to other households within the community and others rented land outside the longhouse territory. At another longhouse, when land shortages and inequitable distribution across households first became a problem, all land was recognised as community owned and then allocated to individuals on an equitable basis. Cramb argues that the Iban have managed to balance private and common property rights to land and trees within an overarching framework that has proved adaptable, resilient and culturally acceptable (p. 362).

In modern Malaysia, traditional smallholder agriculture as practiced by the Iban and particularly the shifting cultivation of hill rice is portrayed as 'backward' and a barrier to more economically efficient 'modern' development associated with large scale plantation agriculture. Cramb debunks this notion and demonstrates how the Iban longhouse (community) system, and the continual resourcefulness and adaptability of its people, provided a balanced and humane approach to development (p. 356) – one that has not inhibited the rapid adoption of commercial crops, nor has it allowed the emergence of landlessness and social conflict (p. 362).

Cramb classifies the process of Iban agrarian transformation as 'adaptive management' rather than 'sustainable development', conveying the reality of an evolving livelihood system in a changing environment rather than some idealised notion of stable equilibrium (p. 360).

This is a comprehensive, well written and up to date reference book that should appeal to a wide ranging audience. It makes a major contribution to the academic and policy literature on shifting cultivation and the role of smallholder agriculture in rural development, within a modernist state development policy framework. It is first and foremost an academic work, reflecting Rob Cramb's expertise in agricultural and institutional economics. However, he also manages to bring the people alive (not a common trait in economic literature) as he has lived and worked beside them.

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