Considerations of Consequences of Rapid Agricultural Modernization Among Two Ngada Communities

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Abstrak

Dalam tulisan ini persoalan perubahan kebudayaan dipertimbangkan dalam hubungan dengan modernisasi pertanian yang cepat antara kelompok-kelompok petani tradisional yang dahulu membuka hutan dengan cara tebas-bakar di Kabupaten Ngada di pulau Flores. Reaksi-reaksi mereka terhadap perubahan dipersisai ini dengan perbandingan antara dua kelompok yaitu Taka Tunga dan So'a, berkenaan dengan efek-efek produksi untuk ekonomi pasar moneter berpengaruh atas siklus upacara tradisional dalam hubungan dengan pertanian dan atas sistem hak milik tanah tradisional. Tulisan ini tidak hanya menyoroti keperluan pertimbangan faktor-faktor kebudayaan lokal sebelum pelaksanaan program-program pembangunan, tetapi juga menyoroti cara pengertian faktor-faktor itu bisa menolong dengan ramalan reaksi terhadap perubahan dalam salah satu kelompok daerah.

Introduction

In Indonesia, the modernization of agricultural practices as a major aspect of the national economy has received much emphasis since the nation gained its independence. In the province of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) of eastern Indonesia a greater part of governmental development efforts also focus on the agricultural sector. The modernizing advancements however tend to be planned and executed with a single objective — economic improvement. As many of the contributors in a recent publication on development in NTT have pointed out, the diversity of the region’s environments and cultures had been ignored before introducing new technologies and methods in cultivation and livestock development (Barrow, Bellies & Andrews 1991). Such neglect of both the social and natural environments is responsible for many not so successful attempts in developing and modernizing the agricultural practices of the people of this region. Moreover, cultural factors are not simply ignored but there is a general lack of knowledge or understanding of these on the part of governmental sectors and development institutions. These issues are also highlighted in the recent works of Daeng 1988; Dove 1988; Metzner 1980, 1982; Webb 1986, 1990 and particularly in Lansing 1991 for the island of Bali.

Research concentrating on traditional agricultural rituals and calendars is practically absent for eastern Indonesia. The important role of these agricultural rituals in the customary cultivation practices of the region have not been given full consideration. Similarly, many generations old traditional cultural knowledge embedded in the
local attitudes about the environmental and ecological patterns in the interaction of local groups with their surroundings also have not yet received much attention.

My current research interests concern the consequences of rapid culture change and the various adaptation mechanisms developed by indigenous groups to cope with such changes. These interests stem from my recent anthropological work completed on the eastern Indonesian island of Flores. Previous field work involved the people of Sara Sedu in the Ngada regency in the context of doctoral research (1991-1993) and consultancy work in the Manggarai regency as a member of an international team of experts on the Indonesian Biodiversity Project.

I am particularly interested in exploring some of the main social-cultural aspects of local agricultural practices and the ramifications of and transformations affected by local modernizing efforts. Two related problems are under current consideration: the adaptations, changes and convergence in local traditional agricultural ritual cycle as an aspect of local cultivation practices in response to agricultural development and modernization among people in the Ngada regency of West-Central Flores in eastern Indonesia; and the transformations in related land ownership and land use patterns. Although the people of this regency are mostly Roman Catholic, their traditional belief and ritual systems are still thriving. Rituals of the annual cultivating cycle are especially important to the people since these are based on the traditional conception that the ultimate source of fertility for the fields are the ancestors and the maintenance of ties with the ancestors is the essential core of the traditional belief system. Christianity is viewed by the people in relation to their traditional religions as a parallel and complementary religion (Molnar 1997). In many parts of the Ngada regency of west-central Flores, land ownership and access patterns are still matters of customary social organization. However, there has been an growth in the informal encouragement by local officials to register individual plots of land as ‘privately owned’ and this a consequence of taxation and an expansion of agricultural modernization efforts in the form of agribusiness.

This paper considers some of the consequences of modernization in the context of culture change in connection with indigenous agricultural practices and rituals, as well as in relation to land tenure issues. Thus, these considerations have an applied significance within the context of agricultural development. Data of past field work experience in the region suggest that social-cultural spheres, particularly those relating to the religious and cosmological system as well as to the interrelated aspects of social organization and land tenure, must be taken into serious consideration before the implementation of any development oriented efforts (see Molnar 1995:139-153). In the Ngada regency, for example, customary land rights are intricately intertwined with social organization and local cosmological conceptions. Therefore, any work undertaken on agricultural issues, including the agricultural ritual cycle, will necessarily include data on customary land rights, and the following reflections and further research in the near future could be significant in this regard as well.

In this paper I will compare responses to change among two groups — one occupying inland, hill or mountain locations (Taka Tunga) and the other inhabiting the plains with plentiful of water sources (So’a). The former mainly employ swidden cultivation, while the latter relatively recently started to use irrigated methods. Both these groups have recently transformed the focus of their production to that of cash crops or wet-rice for a market economy as opposed to subsistence economy.

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3 See Molnar 1994. The research was conducted under the auspices of Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (LIPI) with the sponsorship of Universitas Nusa Cendana with research funding from the Australian National University.
markers.

The right to use certain plots of land was granted by the Nusa clan to the migrant groups and these rights reverted back to the mori tana after each growing cycle and were annually dispensed as long as the various migrant clans participated in the agricultural ritual cycle and the rest of the ritual system of the community. The participation in the annual ritual of ka beka which not only conferred the blessing of the ancestors through the ritual elder of the land owning clan for the newly planted fields but also represented an affirmation of the recognized ritual authority of the mori tana over land and its fertility. The right to use certain plots of land was only granted for the next planting season to the migrant clans if they participated in this ritual. All agricultural rituals had to be performed by this eldest ritual leader of the land owning clan either in the origin (or eldest) house — trunk house (sa’o pu’u) of the Nusa clan or in the ritual field of this named house before any of the other named houses, clans, and individual families were allowed to proceed with activities of the swidden agricultural fields. To do so would invite disaster in the form of crop failure due to supernatural sanctions — withdrawal of life-conferring potential which is only attainable from the ancestors through the actions of the mori tana. Each of the rituals of the agricultural calendar were tied to a particular cultivation activity and/or to the commemoration of a particular subsistence crop. Formerly these rituals, as indeed all rituals of the traditional religious system, required a sacrifice and offering to the ancestors.

Changes came to the Hoga Taka on two fronts — through changes in the belief system and through agricultural modernization — that have profound effects on both their social-cultural fabric. During the 1950s due to the conversion of a ritual elder from the land owning clan of Nusa there was a wide-spread public ban on performing sacrifice and offering to the ancestors. This aspect of the rituals went underground in order not to offend this well-respected member of the community or the ever watchful German priest assigned to the village. Sacrifice and offering to the ancestors was still performed but privately with often a handful of ritual elders as a witness to this part of the rituals (in 1993 I witnessed three of these rituals) but for the public part of the rituals this aspect was none existent. During the last ten years however the sacrifice and offering aspects of rituals have been on a sharp decline (where in 1997 I did not witness any at all) largely due to the unrelenting efforts of the local Catholic priest and the large number of younger people who became priests and nuns from this community. Over the last decade rituals of the agricultural cycle de-emphasized the traditional religious function and placed greater emphasis on aspects of community solidarity and unity, and above all else, rights to agricultural land, the source of the swidden livelihood of the people. However, even these aspects of the traditional agricultural ritual cycle are currently under threat, largely as a result of agricultural modernization.

A decade or so ago the elected head of the administrative village, an agricultural engineer, recognized that the geographic and climatic conditions of Taka Tunga are ideal for not just coffee but also vanilla and cacao production. He enthusiastically taught members of the community in the techniques and methods of cultivating these new crops with a vision for a more prosperous economic future and development of the village. Given the market prices of these cash crops at the time and the limited cash generating alternatives from swidden subsistence crops and livestock and the enthusiastic support of clan elders the farmers were convinced practically overnight to convert as most of their dry-rice and corn fields to cash crops. After the first very successful harvest this venture appeared to be a very lucrative endeavor with large amounts of cash flowing which was largely used by the farmers for education fees of
life time. The agricultural ritual cycle is strictly adhered to where the original land owning clan’s ritual elder resides over major rituals either in the field of the origin house (sa'o pu'u) or in the house itself. Life-conferring potentiality is derived from the ancestors through rituals. The agricultural rituals must be performed on behalf of the community by the mori tana before any activity can be performed in the fields. Not only must the rituals be performed but any agricultural activity must be done in the fields of the mori tana. The neglect of the agricultural rituals or the usurpation of the ritual precedence of the land owner are believed to result in disaster for the crops. The ritual heads of other clans who received land from the original mori tana serve as secondary land owners but they may not perform the agricultural rituals before the original land owner has done so or they would not have any efficacy.

Although the Catholic Church’s presence have been felt over the past 50 years in the presence of Father Mommersteg, it did not effect any major changes on the traditional belief system, and like in so many other places of the Ngada district, here as well the local and world religion are considered to be parallel and separate belief systems. The local priest’s approach has also been very tolerant of local traditions as he himself studied the So’anese culture extensively. In addition, he has worked long and hard to bring a number of development endeavors to the region in order to better the lives of the people. Thus the traditional ritual system did not have to go underground.

About twenty years ago the people of Lo’a have descended from the uplands and founded present day villages. Father Mommersteg was instrumental in encouraging the learning of wet-rice cultivation since there are a number of plentiful water sources for irrigation in the lowlands of So’a. The land in the lowlands was traditionally claimed by the original land owning clan. Fields for irrigated rice were quickly distributed by the Lo’a clan among individual families who were given the right to dispose of the land as they pleased. Thus this land was owned in the manner of private ownership. Indeed, at present each individual plot ownership has been recorded in the books of the administrative village office. Over the past ten years, with the consensus of the original land owner and all secondary land owners of the clans’ swidden fields, even these fields became to be passed on as individual family plots in the same manner as irrigated rice fields, mainly for reasons of a less complicated land tax collection. As irrigated rice cultivation developed [it did not really gain popularity until the past 12-15 years] the upland swidden fields were and still are maintained.

The wet-rice fields became the cash generating plots while the swidden fields still served as subsistence gardens. The swidden plots did not only provide subsistence crops but all agricultural rituals still must be performed there to ensure the continued productivity of all fields — both swidden and wet-rice fields. Agricultural rituals are not performed in the wet rice fields, not only because these rituals have always focused on original swidden subsistence crops but also since these fields are individually owned. However the spiritual potency of these fields are believed to derive from the traditional swidden fields. Thus participation in the communal clan rituals of the swidden fields is in the primary interest of every member of the community. The ritual authority of the mori tana became reinforced and strengthened by the beliefs and practices that view the mori tana as a channel to the blessing of the ancestors. Furthermore, increased productivity also means increased capability to contribute to rituals and both sponsor and participate in clan scale rituals, with an increasing number of people attaining higher ritual status. However, in the past ten years there has been greater emphasis on investing profits from the wet-rice fields in children’s’ education, in brick housing, electricity and electrical appliances and water for almost all households while still hold-
practices also has implications for women’s social and economic status. During recent modernizing efforts in eastern Indonesia the development of handicrafts (weaving, sewing, basket weaving) is often the solution for involving women in development. The ‘welfare approach’ [cf. Moser, 1989] has been popular with various development organizations during the 1950s and 1960s (Braidotti at. al. 1994:78). In eastern Indonesia, research is lacking on the issue of agricultural modernization, especially a shift in focus of production of a market economy, and its affects on the control of production, resources, and income.

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