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Involution's Dynamic Others^I

Tania M. Li

Abstract

Many scholars have debated Geertz's characterization of Java as a site of social and economic involution, in which impoverished peasants worked ever harder to achieve static results. Fewer have taken up his characterization of Indonesia's Outer Islands as a zone of extremes - islands of dynamic export production, often dominated by indigenous smallholders, surrounded by "a broad sea of essentially unchanged swidden making." Taking Geertz's analysis as a point of departure, I use comparisons across distinct conjunctures to explore the conditions under which smallholder production becomes dynamic, and to reflect on the role of culture in social and economic change.

Bio

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The year 2013 marked the half century since *Agricultural Involution* was published. The book informed the thinking of a generation of scholars and is the sixth most often cited of Professor Geertz's numerous texts. The invitation to give the Clifford Geertz Commemorative Lecture in Princeton (26 February, 2013) provided me with an opportunity to re-read the book and consider the contemporary relevance of its two core themes.

The first theme concerned the conditions that enabled or impeded modern economic development or, in the terms supplied by Walt Rostow, "take-off" (1960). This was a Cold War concern, linked to the threat of potentially rebellious peasants, and it shaped the direction of the Modjokoto research project of which *Agricultural Involution* was part. After the dreadful massacre of around half a million alleged communists in Indonesia in 1965, rebellion was out of the question, and the Indonesian military and their allies lost interest in the condition of

^I This article is an expanded version of my lecture. Thanks to the Princeton Department of Anthropology for inviting me to speak. Feedback on the lecture and from the journal's reviewers guided my revisions.

impoverished rural masses. But the predicament of these masses, and the absence of "take off" highlighted by Geertz, merits renewed attention.

For Geertz the problem of Java was that labour was stuffed in the countryside under conditions of stagnating productivity. It was not being drawn off into the cities because no manufacturing sector had developed. The main form of industrial development was extractive, with mines, oil wells and plantations funnelling raw materials into the global economy without corresponding investments in a broad based, national development. Hence the expected agrarian transition from farm to factory, and from country to city, did not occur. Half a century later, many things have changed, but the non-transition, or lack of "take off" Geertz identified still resonates, a finding that should give us pause.

Indonesia has had robust GDP growth in the past decade, but this growth has been virtually jobless. Manufacturing is weak, due to competition from China (Manning and Sumarto 2011; World Bank 2010). As Geertz predicted, the problem of non-transition he identified in Java has become generalized across Indonesia. To a significant extent it has become characteristic of both the global north and south, where we find a "relative surplus population" with little or no productive function.² This population includes the educated unemployed, some of whom are downwardly mobile, and ex-farmers for whom the transition path promised in modernization narratives is a cruel hoax. They can't march off into proletarian futures because no such future is available to them. A still-increasing population adds to the pressure. In Indonesia, the percentage of the population defined as "agricultural" by the FAO decreased from 54% in 1980 to 41% in 2005, but the net number increased by 10 million. This means that more people than ever are trying, somehow, to hold on and survive in rural areas.³ How they survive was a core question of *Agricultural Involution*, and it remains crucial today.

The second major theme of *Agricultural Involution* was the contrast between the Indonesian island of Java, where impoverished peasants worked ever harder to achieve static results, and the Outer Islands where Geertz identified two opposed tendencies. On the one hand, there were dynamic indigenous farmers who readily adopted commercial agriculture. By 1930, smallholders on the Outer Islands were supplying 53% of the non-oil export revenue, and they expanded their planted area fourfold between 1925 and 1940. Rubber smallholders were especially vigorous. In 1938, 800,000 rubber smallholders supplied 60% of rubber exports. The

² On the "relative surplus population" see Li 2009; Smith 2011; Ferguson 2013; Bernstein 2004.

³ Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011: 3 compare changing agricultural populations across Southeast Asia in the period 1980-2005. The net number employed in agriculture in Indonesia began to drop in the 1990s but the trend reversed after 1997. Household income for agricultural wage labourers and small landowners has stagnated relative to income in non-farm households (Kano 2008: 300, 304-5, 381-3). See also De Koninck and Rousseau 2012: 42-49.

rise of smallholder coffee was even more dramatic: production doubled between 1925 and 1928.⁴ But the other tendency was static. Geertz wrote that episodes of dynamism, and the indigenous smallholders who made them happen, were "islands in a broad sea of essentially unchanged swidden making"(1963: 116). He later dismissed the dynamism as well, calling it "incipient, but ill fated" as booms tended to be followed by busts (1984: 515). In the end, even in the Outer Islands, stasis ruled the day.

My argument, on this point, is that Geertz truncated his own insight about dynamism in the Outer Islands, and in so doing missed the opportunity to situate it fully in the cultural orientations and ecological dynamics that were his main concern in the book. Dynamic farmers served Geertz mainly as a foil, the "others" whose difference clarified the distinctively involutory tendencies of village Java, the topic that gave his book its title. Yet the smallholder crop booms Geertz described were not isolated events. As the historian Robert Elson confirms (1997) commercial crop booms were a recurrent feature of the Southeast Asian hinterlands and highlands from early in the nineteenth century. Unlike Java, these areas do not have the right soil and water conditions for intensive rice production so they can't "involute" in the ecological sense Geertz described. They are suited to tree crops such as rubber, coffee, clove, cacao, coconut, and oil palm, which indigenous and migrant smallholders plant whenever market access, prices and productive capacities come into alignment.⁵ Yet this potential for dynamism is routinely overlooked, or misconstrued.

Today, an emphasis on stasis dominates debates among policy makers and activists concerned with the future of highlands and hinterlands across the Southeast Asian region and beyond. National and transnational development agencies highlight the static condition of the populations who are indigenous to these regions and their inefficient use of the land, proposing to introduce large scale plantation style agriculture to make static places and people more dynamic (Deininger 2011). Their views coincide with images of highlands and hinterlands as sites of backwardness urgently in need of civilization, recurrent themes in the cultural history of the Southeast Asian region.⁶ Chief Minister of Sarawak Abdul Taib Mahmud, for example, wants to see "modern agricultural development along the major trunk road with rows of plantations and villages well organized in centrally managed estates." In his

⁴ Geertz 1963: 104, 105, 113, 114, 119

⁵ On Southeast Asia's crop booms see Hall 2011; Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011.

⁶ Winichakul 1994; Li 1999; Eilenberg 2012; Geiger 2008; Scott 2009; Tsing 1993; De Koninck and Dery 1997; Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Turton 2000

view only drastic intervention can bring "rural folk" or "the natives," as he calls them, into the economic mainstream.⁷

Ironically, the same model of stasis dominates the discourse of defenders of indigenous people, although the political bite is of course quite different. Too often, indigenous people are the victims of large scale, capital intensive "development" in the form of mining, hydro dams, plantations and timber concessions which result in eviction, loss of territorial sovereignty, and loss of access to crucial livelihood resources. Although they would welcome the roads, schools and improved health services these schemes promise, the actual experience is often a bitter one as the losses far outweigh the gains. Forced into a defensive posture indigenous people, and their allies in national and transnational indigenous peoples' movements, assert rights to retain distinct cultures, extensive farming systems, and access to forests. They emphasize the value of tradition, and the need to take a cautious, gradual approach to change.⁸ They also highlight the virtues of food sovereignty and the need to maintain diversified farm systems to manage ecological and market risk, core platforms of the global peasant movement.⁹

Regardless of the purpose for which it is employed (to legitimate large scale development or contest it), the stasis model is called into question by the dynamism of indigenous people who have eagerly adopted global market crops, sometimes at the expense of food production. These farmers often don't conform to social movement expectations, hence they seldom figure in their arguments and campaigns. Awkward subjects, they are overlooked or set aside. Nor do they find favour with government officials, who prefer to deal with large plantation corporations from which they can more easily extract taxes, bribes and other revenue streams.¹⁰ Officials argue that indigenous smallholders are not just incongruous market subjects, but incompetent as well. They accuse them of inefficiency and recklessness, especially if they take on excessive debt, mortgage or sell their land, and end up impoverished.

Concern that native smallholders could not handle market engagement was one reason (among others) that Dutch colonial policy in the nineteenth century was devoted to *preventing* the emergence of commercial agriculture among the indigenous population. Officials pursued restrictive policies not just in Java, a topic covered at length by Geertz, but also in the Outer Islands where they argued that the native population should focus on food production and

⁷ Cramb 2012: 278; McCarthy and Cramb 2009.

⁸ See DTE 1999; Afiff and Lowe 2007; Sirait 2009; Warren 2005; Peluso, Suraya Afiff, and Noer Fauzi Rachman 2008; Barnes, Gray, and Kingsbury 1995; Li 2000; Colchester et al. 2006.

⁹ Li 2010; Bernstein 2010; McMichael 2009; Edelman 2001

¹⁰ Dove 2011; Scott 1998

avoid the risk of market exposure.¹¹ They justified this stance in terms of respect for cultural difference, arguing that "eastern" concepts of community solidarity and spiritual well being were incompatible with involvement in commercial agriculture.¹² Colonial authorities should therefore steer native farmers away from commercial ambitions by restoring and strengthening tradition and instituting other "'native protection' devices," as Geertz called them.¹³ Yet farmers in the Outer Islands, then as now, often fail to conform to the assumptions made about them and reject paternalistic guidance, however well meaning, preferring to set their own course.

In the main part of this essay, I revisit the question of involution on Java, "unchanged swidden making" in the Outer Islands, and their dynamic others: indigenous smallholders deeply involved in producing cash crops for global markets. I begin with a brief review of the debate stimulated by *Agricultural Involution*, with its emphasis on shared poverty in Java and the role of culture in determining the direction of economic change. I summarize a unique comparative study from rural Java circa 1990 that helpfully unblocks the impasse that was created by opposing culture to economy, or material processes to symbolic ones. Then I track three conjunctures in the Outer Islands shaped by the introduction of commercial crops: the coffee boom in West Sumatra in the 1920s, which figured prominently in Geertz's account; the cacao boom in Central Sulawesi which I studied quite intensively from 1990 to 2010; and West Kalimantan where rubber was integrated into the swidden system beginning in the 1920s with much less dynamic results.

The conjunctures I examine differ in key respects, and have an important element in common: indigenous smallholders took the initiative to plant commercial crops on their own land, without government support, and in the absence of migrants whose arrival often shapes "frontier" dynamics.¹⁴ The absence of familiar "external" drivers of change (migration with its associated ethnic and religious pluralism, development projects, agribusiness corporations), usefully focuses attention on the dynamism of the indigenous farmers themselves. Like Geertz, I find that a comparative approach opens a rich vein for analysis, as it highlights the specificity of the cultural, material, ecological and other elements that are articulated together at a particular conjuncture. It enables us to ask: Why did this happen here not there? Why in

¹¹ Native was the official term for all the indigenous people of the Indies, i.e. everyone who was not classified as Foreign Oriental or European. The Dutch colonial regime did not further distinguish between peasants and tribes, at least in legal terms, in contrast to the British in India or the USA in the Philippines. Different colonial dividing practices have significant implications for the contemporary politics of indigeneity (Li 2010)

¹² Boeke 1953: 39-41; Li 2007.

¹³ Geertz 1963: 90. See also Geertz 1963: 48, 50, 53, 57, 91; Alexander and Alexander 1991

¹⁴ Kahn 2006; Geiger 2008; Scott 2009

this form and not another? Why at this time and not before?¹⁵ I end by returning to the problem of failed "take off," and the fate of people who remain on the land, struggling to keep their heads above water. Whether they reach this condition by means of stagnation or as a result of dynamic change, their predicament isn't one that more growth will solve, and we need to attend to it.

Involution Revisited

Many scholars have disputed Geertz's characterization of Java as a site of social and economic involution. His thesis has been criticized for understating inequality among farmers, and overstating the extent to which Javanese villagers "shared poverty" by distributing access to land and work to ensure no one was left out.¹⁶ In his response to these critiques, published in *Man* in 1984, he agreed that there was indeed inequality in land ownership, and colonial policies had exacerbated inequality in some regions. But he insisted that no sustained pattern of class polarization had occurred: *kulaks* were thin on the ground. The critics could not explain this "massive social fact," he argued, because their models were "economistic:" they ignored the cultural context of change, and the "passions and imaginings that provoke and inform it" (1984: 515, 523). The thrust of his argument was to state more strongly the importance of culture, which by the 1980s was well established as his central field of concern.¹⁷ He treated shared poverty as a manifestation of a cultural logic or world view that structured multiple elements of village life, from ritual to farming, and ethics to esthetics, domains to which "economistic" analysis gave short shrift.

I doubt that many anthropologists today would defend the terms of this polemic, as it separated culture from economy, the material from the symbolic, and obscured their mutual formation. The point was elegantly made by Robert Hefner in his seminal study of mountain Java, when he argued that "economic change is never just a matter of technological diffusion, market rationalization, or 'capitalist penetration.' Deep down, it is also a matter of community, morality, and power"(Hefner 1990: 2`). In the words of William Roseberry, another of Geertz's interlocutors, cultural forms such as particular notions of household, kinship or community cannot be "taken as history's points of departure," but studied as they emerge "at particular conjunctures, within particular fields of power, and within ... uneven sedimentations of the

¹⁵ See Hart 2006's arguments for a "strategy of relational comparison," and my elaboration of an "analytic of conjuncture" in Li 2014.

¹⁶ The critique and relevant sources are well summarized in White 1983. See also Kano 2008: 390-404; Oki 1984: 281-2; Breman 1980; Husken and White 1989; Hart, Turton, and White 1989

¹⁷ See White 2007

past and the present."¹⁸ In this spirit, I turn to a remarkable comparative study of village Java by Jonathan Pincus that sheds fresh light on Geertz's observations about involution, shared poverty, and the role of culture in economic change.¹⁹

Pincus studied three neighbouring villages on the north coast of West Java in 1989-90 to explore the effects of the Green Revolution which had introduced new seeds and cultivation practices, and greatly increased productivity per hectare. Although the villages were adjacent, and all produced rice, he found significant variation in how the gains from increased productivity were distributed. He located the critical difference in the histories of village formation that shaped the relative powers of the constituent classes and the density of social relations among households, with consequences for the agricultural wage, the availability of credit, interest charged on loans, the likelihood of debt forgiveness in the event of crop failure or illness, and the ability of small land owners to hold on to their land. Bargaining power was also shaped by the relative strength of the "moral boundary" of the village vis a vis other villages, as workers attempted to hold on to work opportunities against the claims of people they defined as outsiders.²⁰ Cultural precepts, in short, were formative elements in struggles over land and labour, although their traction, and their effects, were situated and specific. A brief summary of the situation in two of the three villages will demonstrate.

In North Subang, first settled around 1920, repeated crop failures in the early 1960s forced many farmers to sell their land at very low prices and undertake migrant farm work. Households with surplus rice bought up the land, leading to highly concentrated ownership. Migrant farm workers unrelated to the landowners moved in to fill the labour gap. At the time of Pincus's survey in 1990, 4% of households owned 73% of the rice fields, 74% of households owned no land at all, and 60% had no access to land for rice cultivation.²¹ Most labour was organised on an impersonal daily wage basis, and harvests were open to all comers, regardless of village affiliation. The open harvest arrangement reflected the strong position of landowners vis-à-vis labour in North Subang. Ironically, it was also defended by North Subang workers whose income depended upon open access to harvest work in other villages. Landowners who attempted to close the harvest in the 1970s were forced to abandon their plan, in part due to resistance from North Subang workers who faced retaliatory exclusion by workers in other villages.²² Nevertheless, North Subang landowners captured most of the productivity gains

¹⁸ Roseberry and O'Brien 1991: 10. See also Roseberry 1989

¹⁹ The next few paragraphs are drawn from Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011, which also carries a summary of the third village East Subang.

²⁰ Pincus 1996: 98.

²¹ Pincus 1996: 22, 40-41, 204.

²² Pincus 1996: 102-108.

from the new technologies, and a seven-fold increase in profits enabled many of them to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.²³ The result was further polarization.

South Subang was settled earlier, around 1890, and most of the residents descended from the first settlers, creating a dense network of kinship ties among households. The land was irrigated in 1928, and the increased productivity enabled parents to partition land for their offspring. The result was a large number of micro-holdings, but still significant inequality. In 1990, the top 6% of households owned 38% of the rice land, 37% of households owned no rice land, and 31% had no access to land for cultivation.²⁴ The larger landowners' accumulation strategy was to limit the subdivision of their land and invest in education to enable some of their children to get decent jobs off-farm. They were also involved in money lending: the standard rate of interest on intra-village loans was pegged lower than in North Subang (50%), but was still a hefty 30% even among kin.²⁵ Farmers recruited most of their non-household labour force from within the village on a tied basis, an arrangement strongly defended by the smaller landowners because it enabled them to complete field preparation tasks without a cash outlay. It also gave them access to portions of their neighbours' harvests, thereby spreading risk. Larger landholders complained of labour shortage, but cited the "spirit of 'mutual help'" incumbent on them as members of the village that restricted them from hiring outside labour. Moral pressure from workers successfully limited the use of labour-saving technology such as herbicide. The outcome was that landowners in South Subang used almost twice as much labour per hectare as landowners in North Subang. Harvest shares had remained constant since the 1960s, another indication that wage workers had successfully defended their share of the gains from higher productivity. They had also managed to keep most of the gains inside the village, to the exclusion of workers from outside.²⁶

South Subang came closest to the model of "shared poverty" described by Geertz, and the outcome was (relatively) involutory: new technologies were integrated into the existing pattern of social and material relations to produce more of the same. Cultural precepts worked to limit accumulation, an outcome that wasn't fixed in advance, but was achieved through a process of struggle that was simultaneously material and symbolic, as the moral boundary of the village and the "spirit of mutual help" were variously invoked. Building on this analysis, it seems likely that distinct village histories, patterns of land ownership, and the relative density of kinship ties linking land-rich to land-poor households also help to account for the different fate of villagers in the dreadful massacres of 1965. Geertz did not observe class

²³ Pincus 1996: 135.

²⁴ Pincus 1996: 24-5, 41, 205.

²⁵ Pincus 1996: 152, 169, 171-2.

²⁶ Pincus 1996: 117-123, 135, 215, 217.

tensions in Modjokoto during the time of his study in the late 1950s, and it is possible he overlooked them or turned a blind eye. It is also possible that these tensions were less acute in Modjokoto than they were in Bangsal, a village just 4 miles away, in which the social structure was quite different. In Bangsal in 1973-4, 80% of the residents were landless workers. Class conflict there had been acute since late colonial times, and came to a head in 1965 when all the men in some of the hamlets were killed and their land expropriated. Their widows were excluded from harvest work in subsequent years making it very difficult for them to sustain their families.²⁷ Although both landowners and workers were doubtless familiar with idioms of sharing and caring that feature in the Javanese cultural repertoire, they lacked traction in this case.

West Sumatra in the 1920s

Geertz's characterization of dynamism in the Outer Islands drew heavily on the work of the Dutch sociologist Schrieke (1955: 83-166), who wrote about the rapid uptake of commercial crops among Minangkabau smallholders in West Sumatra in the 1920s, their ready adoption of entrepreneurial practices and mentalities, and the changes in land tenure, credit relations, family, inheritance and customary authority that ensued. "In two decades of an arm's length encounter with European capitalism," wrote Geertz, "the Minangkabau swidden peasant became what the Javanese sawah peasant, struggling to keep head above water for more than a century, never did: an acquisitive businessman fully enmeshed in a pecuniary nexus" (Geertz 1963: 122).

Geertz took note of Schrieke's conclusion that a "greater class differentiation and conflict" had emerged in these areas (1963: 120). These were tendencies he did not see or anticipate in Java, where he argued that polarization was suppressed by norms of shared poverty. But he did not analyse the role that culture played in enabling, limiting or shaping the course of class differentiation in West Sumatra. He offered no parallel to the involution thesis he advanced for Java. Implicitly, he endorsed Schrieke's argument that change in West Sumatra was the result of a unilateral process of loss, as Minangkabau culture was disrupted by the influence of European capitalism and its alien ways. Had he taken Minangkabau farmers' cultural orientation, their "passions and imaginings" more seriously, he might have taken their economic dynamism more seriously as well.

Schrieke's study was commissioned by colonial authorities who wanted to understand what had enabled the communist party to become active on Sumatra's west coast in the period 1923-26. Rather than focus on deficiencies in colonial policing, Schrieke investigated the

²⁷ White 1983: 29.

changing composition of society and the processes of change that made sectors of the population receptive to communist ideas. He traced several social groups, among them former railway workers who had been laid off as a cost-saving measure, and school teachers whose pay was inadequate and frequently late (1955: 86, 92, 95). He paid particular attention, however, to changes in property relations among Minangkabau highlanders.

Since the 1890s, Schieke noted, colonial officials had attempted to strengthen the position of customary land law and the customary authorities tasked with upholding it. The attempt was a losing battle, however, as these authorities had long been implicated in schemes to privatize collective family land and trap kin and co-villagers in debt, a trend which had intensified.²⁸ The most effective protective measure taken by the colonial regime was to isolate the highlanders from commerce by neglecting to build roads. The aim was "to put a check on unregulated import and export" not just to consolidate colonial monopolies, but to oblige the natives to remain in what the authorities conveniently assumed to be their natural, subsistence niche. Colonial officials insisted that "care had to be taken that in every *negeri* as much paddy as possible was stored and as little as possible exported and sold. For a population amply supplied with food meant a contented and peaceful population" (1955: 97). Indeed, this had been Dutch policy since the end of the Padri Wars in 1837, when trade in coffee, pepper and other products was suppressed by asserting control over the rivers. Commerce was further reduced by the imposition of forced coffee cultivation in the period 1847-1908. Absurdly low government prices meant that farmers abandoned coffee as a commercial crop. To meet their cash needs they turned to other export crops that were less tightly controlled (Oki 1984: 271, 277). Nevertheless, suppressed production and enhanced extraction combined to ensure that almost all the surplus was removed from the local economy in this period, leaving only a bare minimum for "subsistence" in place. Taken together, these measures produced the illusion of a "naturally" static, subsistence economy.

The situation changed radically when compulsory coffee cultivation was abolished (1908), and the rice policy was abandoned (1912). Colonial authorities built a new road into the Kerinci highlands, where they hoped to tap abundant reserves of rice. The outcome, however, was not as they planned. Highlanders opted to reduce their rice production in favour of coffee, which was much more lucrative. The coffee boom in the Kerinci highlands was intense: production increased tenfold between 1923 and 1926 (Schieke 1955: 98-100). Farmers in other parts of West Sumatra that were opened up by new roads participated in the coffee boom, or planted other commercial crops such as coconuts and rubber. The authorities attempted to pressure the natives to maintain their rice production, with little success (1955: 101). In one case rubber trees "had to be cut down" because they had squeezed out rice production, an untenable

²⁸ 1955: 115, 120-1, 135, 142

situation in the eyes of colonial officials though not, presumably, in the eyes of the farmers who planted them (Geertz 1963: 123 and fn76).

Travelling in the region, Schrieke saw palpable signs of the new wealth: "Houses, Medan or Singapore style, are rising up like mushrooms, for the population invests all the money not required for expanding cultivation in such building." He also took note of new practices and desires: farmers were hiring wage workers to help with their cash crops and also with rice; there was a new demand for the extension of roads and a new willingness among farmers to help pay for them; and farmers requested that a farmers' journal include market quotations from Batavia and Singapore. There were new elements in the highland social milieu: plantations and plantation workers; progressive headmen; ambitious farmers; and former residents who had migrated away from these previously isolated areas but returned to participate in the new economy (1955: 101, 104-5). These new social elements and practices were sources of new ideas, producing what Schrieke called "a spontaneous revolution in outlook ... among the people as soon as communications were modernized," (1955: 105). Yet Schrieke, and following him Geertz, failed to recognize that the subsistence pattern they took to be traditional was itself the product of a particular history. If there had been a "revolution in outlook," it was at least a century old. Rather than a linear transition from subsistence to commerce, the emphasis on commerce waxed and waned in relation to prevailing economic opportunities and politically-induced constraints. These observations led Akira Oki to reject understandings of risk aversion and a subsistence "ethic" as characteristics of peasant culture, or a peasant "type," in favour of a more precisely situated, historical analysis.²⁹

The new commercial opportunities of the 1920s brought new tensions, notably around the privatization of family-owned and village common land, and the extension of credit which often resulted in the sale of land to cover debt. The "customary" restrictions on land selling, which were already fragile, collapsed under the pressure of increased land values, and opportunities for private gain.³⁰ In the context of these changes, Schrieke observed that some villagers would have liked the authorities to intervene in the old, protective style, and "decree the inalienability of land by law." In fact, decrees forbidding the sale of customary land were still in place, but pawning and outright sale proceeded apace. Schrieke called the decline of customary institutions "a clash between ideology and reality" as commercial pressures that were out of step with older practices could not be halted (1955: 110). Yet the weakness of "traditional" authorities was not simply a matter of changing cultural values. It had a material element. Their power depended upon control over rice land, hence it waxed when villagers

²⁹ Oki 1984: 271-73. See also Kahn's critique of Schrieke 1984: 302-4.

³⁰ (Schrieke 1955: 107-10, 115, 120, 121, 135, 142).

were off clearing new land for coffee and not interested in growing rice, and waned when they returned to rice production during the depression of the 1930s (Oki 1984: 279, 285-88).

The class polarization that occurred during the export boom left many people landless, earning wages below subsistence. Those who could not pay the colonial head tax were obliged to do forced labour on the roads (Oki 1984: 285). Schrieke's proposed solution to this impoverishment was to send landless villagers off to the forest frontier and support them by building the necessary roads and bridges. The communist party, meanwhile, turned the farmers' experiences of land loss, debt, and erratic prices into a story about the evils of capitalism and, by association, the colonial regime which supported corrupt customary authorities, imposed high taxes, and robbed them of their forests and mines by declaring them state property. The spectre raised by party cadre was that Sumatra's independent farmers would become landless and abject, just like the Javanese migrants who worked on the neighbouring plantations. These workers, the cadre explained, had lost their land in Java as a result of colonial policies, a fate Sumatran peasants must avoid by rising up against capitalism and the colonial power (Schrieke 1955: III-12).

Large scale land alienation in Sumatra was a critical element of this conjuncture, elaborated by Joel Kahn. The colonial authority appropriated large areas for plantation agriculture, mining and forest reserves. By 1923, 35% of the total land area in West Sumatra was placed under forest reserve, up to 60% in some districts. Already in 1910, the Governor had recognized that there was insufficient good quality land for native farmers to plant with cash crops because so much had been granted to plantation corporations (Kahn 1984: 318). The result was a pincer effect: indigenous highlanders who wanted land to expand their coffee gardens, or who needed fresh land on which to restart their farms after losing their land to more successful kin, were barred from the forest frontier. To add to the insult, much of the land leased to plantation corporations was not used, hence it did not generate economic activity and employment. It was held in speculation, awaiting increased land prices (1984: 317-22). Hence it was not the cultural disorientation caused by recent commercial penetration into their subsistence world, as Schrieke proposed, but the emergence of a land squeeze combined with scant access to reliable wage work that produced discontent among small scale farmers in West Sumatra. The contemporary conjuncture I have studied in Central Sulawesi has many similarities.

Central Sulawesi 1990-2010

Here I briefly summarize findings from my fieldwork among indigenous highlanders near Tinombo in Central Sulawesi in the period 1990-2010, highlighting the changes that emerged when highlanders started to plant cacao on their former swidden land, and a process of

polarization emerged among them.³¹ When I first visited the highlands in 1990, around 20,000 highland farmers were planting rice, corn, and tubers for food, and tobacco, shallots, garlic, groundnuts for cash. They used the swidden system, which meant planting annual crops on a patch of land, then leaving it for 5-10 years to fallow. They had an open land frontier, and added to their pool of swidden land as needed, by pioneering in primary forest. The pioneer gained individual ownership rights to the land he cleared, and could transfer the land by gift or sale if he wished, though it usually passed down to his descendents. Highlanders didn't divide the pioneer's land when he died, so it became part of an inherited swidden land pool to which all descendents had shared access. Genealogical memories were short, and highlanders didn't find it important to trace precisely how individuals were related to the pioneer, since land was abundant and readily borrowed. Besides, high rates of endogamy meant that everyone living and farming in proximity was related.

The extent of inequality among highlanders in the era of swidden production was limited by two factors: 1) shared access to ample common land meant that everyone who wanted to farm could do so; 2) most of the surplus from their main commercial product, tobacco, was extracted by merchants based on the adjacent coastal strip who advanced them credit. The level of extraction was so severe that highlanders could not accumulate funds to invest in increased productivity, or even in profit-seeking ventures like trade or money lending. Although they produced tobacco for almost two centuries - there are archival references to Tinombo tobacco in 1820 - the dynamism that was potentially introduced by their commercial production was suppressed. This was also the highlanders' observation: the merchants on the coast grew rich from their tobacco, while their situation remained much the same from one generation to the next. Yet the merchants were not strangers. They spoke the same indigenous language as the highlanders (Lauje, pronounced Laujay), and they acknowledged common ancestry although their paths had diverged. In 1990, coastal merchants and farmers in the foothills were Muslim, while farmers further inland were Christian or animist. More importantly, from the merchants' perspective, all highlanders regardless of religion were hopelessly backward because they lacked the solid houses, decent clothing, a rice-and-fish diet that marked social status on the coast.

All this began to change around 1990 when highlanders planted cacao, a boom crop that was spreading rapidly across Sulawesi at the time. In many places cacao was planted by migrants who travelled to the land frontier and bought land cheaply or grabbed it from the indigenous population.³² In the Tinombo area, however, it was indigenous highlanders who planted the

³¹ I analyse this conjuncture and the processes that shaped it much more fully in Li 2014. See also Li 2002.

³² Li 2002, 2007; Ruf, Ehret, and Yoddang 1996

crop on their own initiative. No migrants or members of other ethnic groups moved into the highlands. Nor did development projects or agri-business schemes play a significant part in the transformation. Highlanders hoped that cacao would bring them wealth and security. Severe subsistence crises related to El Niño droughts that afflict this region every 4-7 years, as well as the extractions of the tobacco merchants that left them chronically short of cash, made them eager to find an alternative. Cacao, they reasoned, was much easier to grow, and with the cash they could buy rice and still have funds to improve their houses and buy better clothes, improving their status they eyes of the coastal folk, and in their own eyes as well. They could also send their children to school, overcoming some of the shame they experienced as a result of their illiteracy and inability to speak Indonesian. Unlike the highlanders in mainland Southeast Asia described by James Scott (2009), they did not see themselves as culturally distinct people, proudly sustaining their autonomy in opposition to the social and administrative system centered on the coast. Rather, they thought of themselves as essentially the same as coastal folk, but materially poor and woefully isolated because the government had failed to provide them with roads and schools. On the economic front, they did not seek autonomy from local or global markets, but fair prices and the opportunity to prosper. Their "passions and imaginings" were oriented towards progress, as they defined it. They felt they had been static for far too long. The arrival of cacao offered them a way to change their situation, and change it did, though not quite in the ways they expected.

When Lauje highlanders planted cacao on a patch of former swidden land they effectively enclosed it, withdrawing it from the common pool. Not only did land become individual property, it soon became a commodity, freely bought and sold. A process of polarization followed as highlanders who were able to establish productive cacao on a sufficient scale began to make a profit, and buy land and trees from their less successful neighbours. Many highlanders had difficulty in holding on to their land due to competitive pressures, adverse prices, interest on debt, droughts and other events.³³ Farmers who were squeezed for land were unable to sustain food production, as they had initially planned, because the quality of the soil was too poor. Unlike the farmers of Java, who are blessed with rich volcanic soil, they couldn't coax ever more food out of a tiny plot. Hence they had no choice but to use their small plots efficiently to produce more of the high value crop - cacao in this case - and hope that the money they earned would be enough to buy food. While some highlanders obtained better housing, clothing, education for their children, and improved social standing, for others basic survival became ever more difficult.

An "economistic" analysis, to use Geertz's term, can't explain the "passions and imaginings" that encouraged the highlanders to launch into cacao. Nor can it explain why the process of

³³ Agrarian scholar Henry Bernstein (2010) calls this the "simple production squeeze."

polarization was so rapid and steep. Highlanders who had prospered from cacao helped their neighbours and kin with small gifts of food, cash or loans out of a sense of concern and obligation, and also to deflect envy and witchcraft attack. But their traditions of sharing and caring were formed in the era of land abundance when anyone who wanted to farm could do so. As conditions changed, these "traditions" did not guarantee subsistence for all. They served, rather, as points of leverage in struggles over land, labour and proper conduct. James Scott made a similar observation in his village study in Malaysia: patrons stopped behaving like patrons when the arrival of combine harvesters reduced their need for loyal workers, although moral pressures continued to shape the struggles that ensued (Scott 1985).

In the Lauje highlands, where I saw critical turning points and radical breaks (the privatization of land, the abandonment of food production), highlanders saw pragmatic adjustments: obviously, land could no longer circulate among kin because cacao is a long term tree crop, which belongs to individuals. They didn't reject the practice of sharing bundles of fresh corn with neighbours and kin, they just didn't grow any more corn so the issue was mute. Similarly, they no longer practiced reciprocal labour exchange because that practice was tied to the strenuous work of swidden farming, and the need to ensure the timely planting of rice. Cacao doesn't need much work. Up to ten hectares could be managed by a couple with occasional hired help. The transformations were far from seamless, and there were debates and struggles on many fronts that I do not have space to review here. Over the two decades I followed these processes, I was able to track how highlanders drew on elements from their cultural repertoire to produce novel arguments, legitimate their own practices, and formulate moral critiques. Culture became a dynamic field in which notions about what was normal, reasonable, or "traditional" were mutable and often contested, but they were not random.³⁴ They were, in Roseberry's terms, "uneven sedimentations of the past and present," articulated together at particular conjunctures.

The process of transformation in the period 1990-2010 was dynamic indeed, equivalent to the one Schrieke reported in West Sumatra. There too, some highlanders amassed fortunes and built fine houses, while others lost their land due to debt. Neither case fits the model proffered by the indigenous peoples' movement, or the global peasant movement, which envisage capitalism as an alien force that arrives from the outside to disrupt culturally informed practices that would otherwise be (relatively) static. Nor are they fully explained by Schrieke or Geertz, whose explanation for change in West Sumatra emphasized the impact of new ideas upon culture, rather than the continuous creation of culture as elements in the conjuncture shift. Formative elements of the conjuncture I examined included the price of cacao in the global market, access to cacao seeds, and new market channels. As in West Sumatra, it also

³⁴ On tradition and emergence, see Williams 1977.

included the progressive closing of the land frontier as officials designated large areas of what they defined as "under-utilized" or waste land to commercial plantations or claimed it as state forest. The materiality of the milieu was key, as Geertz recognized: what would grow where, the quality of the soil, rainfall and crop diseases. The specifics of the crop were also important. Cacao is highly susceptible to disease, and needs to be showered with agricultural chemicals to keep it productive. This feature made it a difficult crop for smallholders who were just getting by, and favoured farmers who were making enough money to buy these chemicals, and obtain good yields. And highlanders "passions and imaginings," their modes of kinship and care, and their historically, spatially situated sense of what kind of people they wanted to be, gave meaning and direction to everything else.³⁵

West Kalimantan, 1970s and 2010

Very briefly, I want to describe a conjuncture that was much less dynamic than the two I have described thus far, in order to tease out the critical difference between them. Here I draw on the work of Michael Dove writing about Dayak farmers in West Kalimantan in the 1970s. These farmers had achieved a stable balance between food and cash crops, more specifically swidden rice and rubber. Dove argued that the two crops were complementary in terms of land, labour, and economic function, and Dayak farmers adjusted the balance between them in a flexible manner. They tapped their rubber trees less when they were busy with rice, and more when they had a poor rice harvest or had other needs for cash.³⁶ Since they were often short of rice, as their swidden production was prone to failure, an income from rubber helped them to make up the shortfall. Members of a household with rubber trees could avoid doing wage work. In particular, they could avoid having to work for neighbours at critical times in the rice production cycle when they needed to concentrate on their own farms to secure the next harvest. Future harvests could be pledged to a trader to gain access to credit when needed, but Dove makes no mention of trees being seized for non-payment. Presumably, if this happened, the farmer could plant more. In sum, planting rubber under these conditions was the perfect "middle-peasant" strategy: it enabled market engagement without undue market risk, and it not establish the conditions for class polarization.³⁷

³⁵ See Hefner 1990: 20.

³⁶ Dove 1993; Dove 2011.

³⁷ Netting 1993; Bernstein 2010. Ellen Wood (2002) makes the switch from engaging in markets when a lucrative opportunity presents, to livelihoods governed by the "market imperative" the critical diagnostic of capitalist relations. I discuss definitions of capitalist relations more fully in Li 2014.

Two critical differences between this conjuncture and cacao in Sulawesi are these: 1) Kalimantan in the 1970s had massive land reserves and a tiny population, so rubber could be added to the farmer's repertoire without squeezing out rice, and without one farmer's expansion squeezing out neighbours and kin. 2) Rubber does not need chemical inputs, so it does not entangle the farmer in debt. Inefficient rubber producers could hold on to their trees and tap them erratically without the ratchet effect or downward spiral into landlessness that arose with cacao. The result in Kalimantan was that rubber production was widespread, low-intensity, and not especially dynamic. Its ecological requirements enabled it to fit into swidden landscapes and livelihoods without radically transforming them, in just the way Geertz described (1963: 59, 122). Perhaps this accounts for why Dayak rice/rubber smallholders have become the icons of the indigenous peoples' movement, and their diverse, sustainable farming systems would easily find favour with the global peasant movement as well. The conditions that sustained the rice/rubber system are shifting, however, as the arrival of massive oil palm plantations is squeezing land access, and polarization among oil palm smallholders is also increasing.³⁸

Conclusion

Agricultural Involution focused mainly on involution, represented by Java in Geertz's account. I have focused instead on involution's dynamic others, the entrepreneurial farmers we sometimes find in Indonesia's Outer Islands and across Southeast Asia in the uplands, hinterlands and forest frontiers which are unsuited to intensive rice production, but suitable for commercial tree crops. Given access to markets, farmers in these regions quickly take up boom crops and may give up food production if it is squeezed out by limited land or labour. Their "passions and imaginings" encourage them to plant new crops and engage in new practices that they hope will enable them to improve their lives, whether that means building a new house "Singapore style," sending children to school, or more modestly, stabilizing the flows of food and cash they need to survive. The depth of transformation provoked by the new crops depends on many factors, among them, crucially, the availability of land. When new crops are associated with polarization, as they were in Sumatra and Sulawesi, but not in Kalimantan, they produce a new landless class that can no longer survive on the old terms, and is at risk of impoverishment.

So what is to be done? Sending land-short smallholders off to the land frontier was the solution Schrieke proposed for Minangkabau highlanders who lost out from Sumatra's 1920s coffee boom. In Indonesia and elsewhere, however, the land frontier is rapidly closing down

³⁸ See McCarthy 2010; Rist, Feintrenie, and Levang 2010; Colchester et al. 2006; Sirait 2009

for smallholders as governments set aside land for forest reserves and non-agrarian uses, and assign land to plantation corporations (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011). In Indonesia, ten million hectares of oil palm now blanket the landscape of the Outer Islands, and the government plans to add ten million more. The rationale for favoring plantations is their superior efficiency and the generation of jobs, but their efficiency is disputed, and the number of jobs is small. Oil palm needs only one worker per five hectares. Besides, priority is usually given to migrant workers who are tied to the plantations, hence more easily disciplined (Li 2011). Contemporary plantations, like the colonial ones Geertz described, treat indigenous farmers "like mosquitoes," a nuisance to swept out of the way (Geertz 1963: 110-11).

The expansion of plantation agriculture monopolizes huge areas of land, and locks smallholders out of spaces in which they could otherwise develop their own production. In this context, mobilizing against eviction and land seizure continues to be, quite rightly, the main focus of indigenous peoples' movements in Indonesia and elsewhere. The peasant movement continues, again correctly, to demand distributive land reform, since land remains crucial to smallholder survival and prospects for prosperity. Both these movements need to pay more attention to rising inequality among smallholders, which has diverse sources: in North Subang, harvest failures obliged farmers to sell land, and enabled others to buy it at low cost; in West Sumatra, coffee boom prosperity was mainly enjoyed by village elites who were able to privatize "customary" land; in Central Sulawesi, the chemical dependence of cacao squeezed many farmers out. Polarization among smallholders is an old and intractable problem, but its consequences are more serious now than they were in previous decades because closing land frontiers make it harder for smallholders who lose out in one location to start again in another.

At this point, the two themes of *Agricultural Involution* come together, with striking contemporary relevance. The alternative to finding new land is to march away to the city and look for a job. This is a viable prospect in parts of Southeast Asia with diversified rural and urban economies such as Thailand and Malaysia, and for migrants able to cross international borders to find work, but it is very difficult for ex-farmers who have little education, zero capital, and limited social networks.³⁹ Uneven access to jobs is exacerbated by the more general problem of failed "take-off" or jobless growth that leaves lots of people, young and old, rural and urban, with limited livelihood opportunities. In Central Sulawesi in 2009, for example, only 5% of the provincial labour force worked in manufacturing and mining combined (BPS 2010: 103). Although conditions vary across the archipelago, the lack of off-farm work in this province is not unique. It leaves farmers and increasing numbers of landless workers in much the same predicament as the one Geertz identified on Java in the 1950s. They

³⁹ Rigg 2006, 2007; Rigg and Vandergeest 2012.

are obliged to stay in the countryside, perched on tiny plots of land, surviving on wages that are sporadic and low. They struggle to keep their heads above water. I'm not confident that their traditions of sharing and caring, which were formed under conditions of land abundance, will be sufficient to sustain them. Often, they are the casualties of the same processes that enabled their kin to prosper. It is a new conjuncture, and a new challenge.

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