

LAND USE AND FARMING SYSTEMS AT THE PERIPHERY OF THE CROCKER RANGE NATIONAL PARK SABAH, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Shifting cultivation which usually employs slash-and-burn farming practice and commonly interwoven with cultural attributes of the Murut and Dusun communities, is now a dying culture. This paper argues that the transformation of this age-old farming system is attributed to both external and internal factors.

INTRODUCTION

The Dusun and Murut communities in Tenom and Keningau districts reflect a typical rural sector in transition. These indigenous peoples whose ancestors had inhabited the fringes of the Crocker Range rainforest reserves for centuries, are both subsistence and smallholder farmers. Although quite a substantial number of them are still cultivating upland rice using a slash-and-burn farming method, such traditional farming practice has gradually given way to commercial agriculture in recent years.

The transformation of this traditional farming system, from one which was solely based on shifting cultivation of upland rice to mixed cropping that emphasises cash crops cultivation alongside food crop production appeared to be attributed to both internal and external agents. The most important external agents that were instrumental in exposing these indigenous communities to cash economy (through cash crops cultivation) were the North Borneo Company and the colonial government of North Borneo. However, it was not until the North Borneo territory joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 (which was subsequently renamed as Sabah), that a cash economy made a significant in-road to these local communities.

On the other hand, the most important internal agents are state agencies. They are directly responsible for implementing government policy towards commercialisation of agriculture at the state and community levels. Cash crops cultivation was intensified through a direct political intervention in the past three decades by the state government of Sabah. This policy helped promote and establish a crucial linkage between farm production and market, principally to discourage shifting cultivation among indigenous peoples in Sabah. As we shall see later in the subsequent discussion, the crop diversification strategy used by farmers to cope with the demand of market economy has significantly reduced shifting cultivation among the Dusun and Murut communities.

The second internal agent that has a significant influence in the diffusion and adoption of cash cropping has been the need for cash to meet family financial requirement. As a result, cultivation of cash crops such as rubber and cocoa has become a very attractive means for diversifying agricultural production. This has inevitably changed the agro-economic activities