Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response by Robert Cooper

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Robert Cooper’s study, based on research conducted in Northern Thailand between 1973 and 1975, describes the varying responses of four Hmong villages to environmental pressures. In the previous decade resource scarcity had reached a critical phase precipitating the deterioration of the swidden economy and the relative equality and autonomy it had sustained for the Hmong. The problem is not a recent one; it has historical roots in the incursions of lowland populations (originally in China and more recently Southeast Asia), and the expansion of the capitalist market. Cooper argues that resource scarcity is not primarily a consequence of the overly maligned traditional swidden system itself. Competing demands for timber and land resources and for commercial quantities of opium come from outside Hmong society and are tied to social relations essentially opposed to its lineage-based principles.

Despite considerable variations in the responses of the four communities to environmental strains — involving combinations of traditional swidden and commercial opium production, alternative cash crops and terraced rice cultivation — the general pattern of change in Hmong society points to developing class divisions. For a small number of Hmong, able to establish terraces near water sources, the transition to permanent settlement and new forms of land tenure has brought a new and potentially permanent prosperity. At the same time this process has been one of gradual alienation for the majority. Decreased land availability means shorter fallow cycles and declining productivity. Resort to opium production to supplement declining subsistence yields over the last several decades staved off crisis and maintained the swidden system temporarily. But in the longer term opium cultivation methods nevertheless contributed to the deterioration of the traditional Hmong economic base.

Alternative-crop projects and resettlement programmes sponsored by aid agencies have also contributed to the impoverishment of the Hmong. In Pha Pu Chom village Hmong investment of time and resources in terrace construction was rendered worthless by the government’s failure to provide promised irrigation facilities. Volatile market prices for cash crops substituted for opium subject Hmong in marginal situations to economic insecurity and dependence.

Parallel to the growing class divisions between land owning Hmong and the land poor who must supplement their independent agricultural activity with wage labour are changes in relations within the domestic economy. Co-operative relations between men and women in swidden rice production are being displaced by exploitative (“indirect paid labour”) relations within the Hmong family in the cash-crop sphere. Of particular interest is Cooper’s discussion of the mutually valorising deployment of family labour and wage labour in the capital accumulation process.

Although primarily concerned with Hmong responses to their material situation, Cooper does not neglect the central importance of Hmong social categories and cultural values. The tragedy of poverty is not only the difficulty of making ends meet and maintaining health in the face of declining living standards, but also deprivation of meaning — the inability to reciprocate socially or to make the appropriate sacrifices to the ancestors. Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response addresses problems relevant to economic anthropology and development planning, cultural ecology, Marxist theory and women’s
studies. Operating out of a loose Marxist framework, the work is at the same time theoretically eclectic, ethnographically sensitive and should stimulate general interest and debate.

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With “Feasts of Honor” Volkman gives us the most lively and intimate picture of contemporary Sa’dan Toraja society yet published. The Toraja, inhabitants of the South Sulawesi highlands (Indonesia), have in recent years become well-known to the outside world largely on account of their dramatic and colourful ceremonies. Mortuary rituals in particular, which are often celebrated on a lavish scale, have become something of a tourist attraction. Volkman concentrates on exploring the extensive changes which may be discerned in Toraja social and ritual life this century. The book is based on fieldwork conducted in 1976–78 on the slopes of Tana Toraja’s highest mountain, Sesan. To students of Toraja society it is particularly valuable in giving a detailed picture of the social life of this northerly region of Tana Toraja, so far neglected by other researchers. Recent major publications on Toraja by Nooy-Palm (1979) and Koubi (1982), both mines of ethnographic information, have tended to dwell in the ethnographic present; Volkman’s is a different sort of book — shorter and less encyclopaedic, but set squarely within a historical framework (a task which has been made much easier of recent years by the historical researches of Terance Bigalke), and focusing on the current cultural “dilemmas” which change has produced.1 The author approaches her subject from a number of angles. In an introductory chapter she sets the historical scene, and in later ones goes on to show us how historical changes are played out in the lives of one particular family, from the Dutch colonial era, through the Second World War, Japanese Occupation, and the unsettled years of the 1950s, to the present era of nationalism, tourism and migration. Migration, says Volkman, is “probably the single most dramatic fact of social life” in the village which formed the subject of her study.

Volkman combines history, personal narrative, myth and anecdote with penetrating observation of local politics as played out in ritual performances and of the disputes which may arise in this context. In analysing these social situations, she allows the reader to see the multiplicity of attitudes toward their culture which currently exist among Torajans as they energetically debate the role of ritual in a society already radically changed by Christianity, education, migration and the decay of old status hierarchies. Furthermore,