

Re-encountering resistance: Plantation activism and smallholder production in Thailand and Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract: *The emergence of social and environmental movements against plantation forestry in Southeast Asia positions rural development against local displacement and environmental degradation. Multi-scaled NGO networks have been active in promoting the notion that rural people in Southeast Asia uniformly oppose plantation development. There are potential pitfalls in this heightened attention to resistance however, as it has often lapsed into essentialist notions of timeless indigenous agricultural practices, and unproblematic local allegiances to common property and conservation. An exclusive emphasis on resistance also offers little understanding of widespread smallholder participation in plantation production across the region. A useful method of approaching the complexity of local responses to plantation development is through the history of legal and informal resource tenure, within an analysis of rural political-economic restructuring. Drawing on research in Thailand and Sarawak, I suggest that a more nuanced appreciation of both the structural constraints and deployments of agency which characterise the enrolment of rural people into plantation commodity networks, opens up new spaces for analysis and political action, which supports a geographically embedded view of relations of power, rural livelihoods and environmental politics.*

Keywords: *Southeast Asia, plantations, resistance, smallholder production*

Few aspects of rural development in Southeast Asia have generated as much controversy as fast-growing tree plantations (e.g. Carrere and Lohmann, 1996; Lang, 2002). In Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, tree plantations now extend over large areas, while neighbouring countries appear poised to join the ranks

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of the major plantation producers. This expansion has not gone unchallenged – there has been substantial, locally generated protest across Southeast Asia focused on plantations. In Malaysia and Indonesia, discourses of place, nature, indigeneity and customary ownership have formed key platforms from which rural people have attempted to protect their land and livelihoods from agro-industrial estates. In many instances, local protest initiatives have successfully linked with national and global activist networks against the expansion of tree plantation production. It is often where these environmental narratives intersect – the defence of a fragile nature, customary resource tenure, and indigenous identities – that a powerful discourse and coalition network of opposition to plantation development is formed.

There are important divergences in ideas of place and indigeneity across the region, based on settlement histories, colonial and bureaucratic state formation, and legal-institutional contexts. In forest landscapes in particular, the differential production of what Peluso and Vandergeest (2001) have termed the *political forest* has a key bearing on the process by which incipient state bureaucracies claimed control over large areas of national territory. Colonial-inspired land and forestry laws continue to represent a crucial framework for understanding the uneven production of ‘plantation space’ out of ‘forest space’, in what most often remain highly contested territories. In this paper I argue that the deployment of different plantation space-making strategies, as they are enacted over diverging local livelihood practices, resource tenure systems and settlement histories, influences how communities respond to, and participate in, the introduction of tree plantations in their districts.

To illustrate this I compare two instances of recent plantation development in Thailand and Sarawak (see Fig. 1), and the local responses that these have generated. In Sarawak, local longhouse groups have organised protests and filed legal challenges against a recent pulp mill and plantation mega-project. In this sense, the Borneo Pulp and Paper case follows a very encouraging narrative (to date) of successful local resistance to displacement-inducing acacia plantations. In Thailand, there has been a longer history of popular mobilisations against displacement from eucalyptus plantations. Characterisations of these environmental movements in Thailand have tended to produce a view of widespread and deep local resistance to resource development projects. However, in Thailand there are also thousands of small to medium scale eucalyptus growers, who form essential nodes in the fibre supply networks for all of the country’s major woodchip and integrated pulp and paper mills. This situation raises the difficult question of what aspects of plantation production are being *resisted* in Thailand, and what conceptual space is being left for local agency and smallholder participation in plantation commodity networks. Following recent work by Bebbington (2000), Rigg and Nattapoolwat (2001), Li (2002) and Majid Cooke (2002), among others, I suggest that these sites of participation in smallholder, commercial tree crop production indicate a need to further problematise how we think about the relationship between local resistances and local engagements in capitalist rural development, and globalisation.

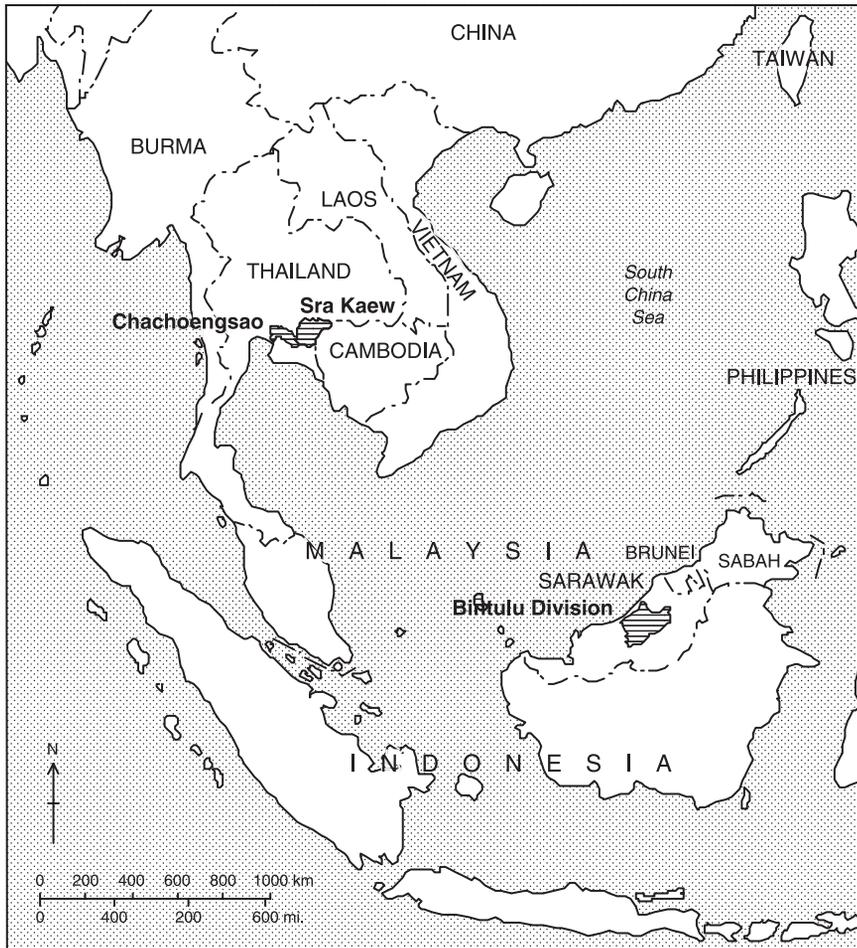


Figure 1. Map of Southeast Asia showing study sites

LAND TENURE, PLANTATIONS AND 'EUCALYPTUS-ACTIVISM' IN THAILAND

Beginning in the early to mid 1980s, a movement centred around what I will call 'eucalyptus activism' emerged in rural Thailand, which coincided with a number of large-scale plantation schemes. There were numerous incidents of local people uprooting eucalyptus trees in the northeast (Isan), and organising to resist local evictions from forest reserve areas (*Bangkok Post*, 1988). The rural reactions over these incidents (see Lohmann, 1993), which explicitly tied eucalyptus trees to evictions and displacement, and to a range of reputed environmental impacts, set the stage for a freeze on the allocation of new eucalyptus concessions in Forest Reserve areas in 1989. The Re-Afforestation Act of 1992 required cabinet approval for leases in Forest Reserve of over eight hectares. Subsequently, there have been no large scale concessions

awarded to forest plantation companies in Thailand that I am aware of. Companies looking to substantially increase their area of wood production have thus been pressed to seek supplies from a range of other sources, from land leasing or purchasing agreements, existing Forest Department tree planting initiatives, land held by urban-based speculators, and through contract eucalyptus agreements with large and small landowners.

It is useful to place the response of local groups to eucalyptus within the territorial strategies employed by the Thai state. Critical is the manner in which the Thai Forestry Department was able to lay claim to vast areas of land – a process which Vandergeest (1996) has termed state territorialisation. However, the central problem for forestry planning throughout Southeast Asia is that the very idea of an empty, unclaimed space is largely a fiction. Indeed, many areas in Thailand were demarcated as Reserve Forest *post*-settlement. This situation contributes to a chaotic rural land tenure system, in which millions of rural people remain unable to claim full title. Occupied areas of ‘degraded’ Forest Reserve are also the lands that the Forestry Department has attempted to reforest with eucalyptus. In Thailand, local people are increasingly able to contest such displacement or eviction, in part through the committed efforts of a vigorous NGO sector, although many restrictions on farming activities in Reserve Forest remain. For instance, many farmers are unable to access private credit without full land title, and the Forestry Department has continued to enact conditionalities on the allocation of territories to the Agricultural Land Reform Office.

PLANTATION-LINKED DISPLACEMENT IN THAILAND’S ‘WILD EAST’

Numerous reports of land grabbing, threats and intimidation in relation to control over eucalyptus production land emerged in Thailand through the 1980s and 90s. These problems are linked to entrenched inequalities in the Thai countryside, involving insecure land ownership for millions of farmers settled in Forest Reserve areas, the persistence of provincial godfathers, and ‘locally influential people’ (particularly in what has been called Thailand’s ‘Wild East’ seaboard), and the illegal or coercive activities of plantation companies. Displacement effects in the countryside are not restricted to eucalyptus – other cash crops, such as sugar cane and more recently shrimp, have also tended to encourage the use of territorial coercion. However the fact that plantation companies claimed a ‘green’ image, yet did little to address the manner in which they gained access to crucial eucalyptus fibre, opened the industry to severe criticism.

Thai pulp firms obtain a high percentage of their fibre supply through scores of ‘middlemen’, involved in harvesting, loading and transporting of eucalyptus logs produced by thousands of small to medium-scale farmers. This loosely organised and shifting supply structure makes it difficult to establish definitively from where companies source their fibre, and which producers might be linked, directly or through their suppliers, to specific

instances of eviction, or coercive intimidation. It is also difficult to gauge the overall extent of these episodes in Thailand. However, from speaking with attendees at an anti-eucalyptus and land eviction meeting in Sra Kaew which attracted hundreds of local people, I suggest that in eastern Thailand the loss of smallholder land to the Forestry Department and other business-political interests, for conversion to eucalyptus plantations and other cash crops, should be viewed as widespread.¹

The above description supports a familiar narrative of coercion and local resistance to the intrusions of cash crop commodity production in Thailand. In neighbouring Chachoengsao province however, the efforts of companies to establish plantation space have taken another form – through purchases from highly indebted farmers. Next I outline a case study in which a local village is responding differentially to a land-purchasing programme, from the Advance Agro company.

Village (*ban*) Laem Yai² situated near Chachoengsao town is a farming community of approximately 100 households. Most landowning villagers plant wet rice in the low-lying lands and cassava in the higher areas, while others maintain plots of vegetables and corn in fields with irrigation access. The village is located outside of Thailand's Forest Reserve system, and thus full title deeds are available – for those who can pay the fees for upgrading their documents. However the village is also centrally located in the heart of Advance Agro's eucalyptus production zone in eastern Thailand. The company's eucalyptus plantations, secured through a land purchasing programme, now almost completely encircle the village, and have resulted in a rapid transformation of livelihoods.

Farmer debts in Laem Yai have driven local land sales to the Suan Kittti company, a subsidiary mill of Advance Agro. In the period from the late 1980s to 1997 land prices in the village rose from approximately 4,000 baht per rai³ to an average of 60,000/rai, and up to 80,000 for land with access to water (village interviews, 2001). Meanwhile, debt burdens of informants in Ban Laem Yai, to the Agricultural Bank as well as informal creditors, could range upwards of 400,000 baht. For those who could reach a deal with Suan Kittti for the sale of land, it was often a gainful venture. Some villagers allegedly sold land in Laem Yai and then moved to purchase farmland elsewhere. Persuasion through economic circumstances played a key role in local displacement, yet there were also hints of coercion. Villagers suggested that the company did not employ direct force, but at times spatial access to irrigation water or a road was cut off by the expanding plantations. This situation on occasion left the villagers with little choice but to sell their land, with reduced bargaining power.

A perception which stood out in many of my interviews was one of resignation. One middle-aged farmer in Laem Yai summed up the views of many in responding to a question of his views on the 'fairness' of the process which has seen Suan Kittti expand its holdings: 'The land already belongs to the company, it is an impossible question, there is no need to talk about it.' There was strong support for the sentiment that much of the money gained from the sale

of land by villagers has disappeared. A village sub-district (*tambon*) council member provided the following perception:

All farmers spent the money, I did it too. Afterwards, there was nothing left. It depends, some people think they made the right decision, some the wrong.

For people who sold land assets without buying further farmland, the situation usually meant an entrance into the local or urban-based wage labour economy.

Although this mixed view of the land consolidation process was perhaps the dominant theme running through the interviews, people did articulate 'ideal visions' for their community. Villagers typically expressed a sadness that local farmers were being displaced from their rice and cassava fields. Another village Tambon Council representative, noting the increasing commercialisation of village social relations stated:

Some feel guilty and upset they have to sell the land, people at that time had no idea of the problems to follow, the money was not worth enough. Things have not improved, because after a salary almost all money is spent on food, in the old days, when one had their own land, they could harvest rice, but now we have to pay for everything.

A representative consensus from the interviews was:

If the people had no debt and no company, the people would not go anywhere and would continue farming cassava and rice.

I suggest that Ban Laem Yai may represent a typical instance of how rural displacement through land commercialisation occurs as a result of plantation development in areas outside of the Thai Forest Reserve system with fairly secure land ownership in place. I heard little mention here about resisting the loss of common property resources. Indeed, due to the nature of settlement, in which new families claimed and cleared the logged-over forest on a household basis, land has traditionally been held in private tenure. Negative effects of the plantations on soil and water availability are often noted, yet most often these effects are situated within the villagers' own participation in land sales, their employment with the company, or through involvement as outgrowers. Villagers may be above all pragmatic in the face of displacement due to increased land commercialisation, but still retain what they consider as an ideal vision for their communities. For almost all villagers, this vision is one that does not include the extent of eucalyptus plantations seen today, and instead includes more economically viable smallholder opportunities.

Displacement as occurring in this village is complex, in part because plantation development did not take the form of a spatially contiguous project. Rather, it resembles an ongoing process of poorly regulated land purchases by an industry, facilitated through smallholder debt and the economic imbalances of Thailand's rural sector during the boom. In this sense, farmers attempt to

negotiate the political realities with which they are faced, but they nevertheless challenge the fairness of how these forces are played out in their village.

LOCAL ENGAGEMENTS: CONTRACT EUCALYPTUS FARMING

A further strategy of creating plantation space in Thailand is through contract eucalyptus farming arrangements established between companies and private growers. Small-scale farmers establish eucalyptus on areas ranging from 1 rai up to 200–300 rai, with the average holdings for outgrowers often in the range of 30–50 rai (research interviews, 2003). Purchases of logs from contracted and non-contracted farmers now represent a primary fibre supply strategy for every Thai woodchip and pulp and paper producer. For some companies, such as Phoenix Pulp and Paper in Khon Kaen, 100 per cent of their fibre comes through local growers. The Thai Tree Farmers Association (Nakarin, 2001) estimates the total eucalyptus production area to be 460,000 hectares, with small landowners accounting for almost 65 per cent of this total. A rough estimate for the total number of eucalyptus farmers in Thailand would be upwards of 30,000.

From 1994–97, until the financial crisis, the Royal Forestry Department provided free seedlings, fertiliser and soft loans from the Agriculture Bank for the planting of eucalyptus. Many farmers participated in these promotional programmes, if only for the availability of new credit. In some areas, such as around Khon Kaen, this led to an oversupply of eucalyptus logs, all maturing at the same date. The economic crash of 1997 pushed farmers to liquidate maturing tree investments for cash, which led to stagnant farm gate prices for logs, and a backlog of trucks waiting to unload at factory gates. When this was combined with the usual risks faced by Thai eucalyptus outgrowers, in terms of achieving adequate yields, and in negotiating reasonable fees for harvesting and transportation, eucalyptus farmers in key production areas of northeast Thailand were becoming increasingly disenchanted (Makarabhirom and Mochida, 1999). By the late 1990s many began shifting to other cash crops.

At the present time, this balance appears to be changing. The removal of government supports for eucalyptus farming in 1997, combined with new state support interventions for other export crops, and the addition of a major new production line at Advance Agro in the mid 1990s, has led to a fibre supply 'squeeze' for the mills. There has been increasing competition between companies and their middlemen buyers for supplies of eucalyptus, and a growing trend for companies to search far beyond their optimal range of a 150 km radius from factory gate, as far as 500 km in search of supply. Further evidence of a supply crunch is seen in that farmers in Thailand are now harvesting trees as early as three years, and are increasingly in a situation where they can exit buyer arrangements as better offers arrive. My interviews suggest varying interpretations of the severity of the supply crunch between companies. However the supply situation is sufficiently worrying to push the Thai Pulp and Paper Industry Association to fund a new study aimed at renewing support for the fast-growing plantation industry. Thai companies are also seeking to increase the extent of contract relationships with local farmers, and

considering entering into the transportation and harvesting aspects of the supply chain to ensure raw materials (research interviews, 2003). The new Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment is also seeking new strategies for boosting plantation area, including earmarking a portion of village community forest for commercial production.

Viewed from this vantage point, eucalyptus appears much like any other cash crop in Thailand with potential negative environmental effects, such as cassava and rubber, although these species rarely attract the attention of NGOs. It remains to be seen what effect Thai eucalyptus activism will have on future state programmes in support of the outgrower sector. However, the five years of impasse, which have plagued a major new plantation and pulp mill joint venture proposal negotiated between Advance Agro and the Chinese government, indicate that the allocation of large-scale concessions to plantation companies in Thailand is now nearly impossible.

NATIVE CUSTOMARY LAND AND PLANTATION DEVELOPMENT IN SARAWAK

The absence of officially demarcated and allocated land and resource rights in Sarawak is again reflective of the broader land tenure situation across Southeast Asia. In Sarawak however, the Brooke regime was among the most pro-active in enshrining into law a pluralist interpretation of Native tenure arrangements. The subsequent interim period under British rule resulted in the 1958 Land Code, which recognised a limited extent of Native Customary tenure under Dayak *adat*. Claims to land and resources by Dayak groups through the notion of Native Customary Rights thus remained a distinct legal field, based on racialised colonial interpretation of ethnicity and livelihood practices.

Brosius (2000: 10) views post-colonial interventions in rural Sarawak to have been based around three broad strategies: the promotion of the timber industry; the creation of large-scale plantation estates; and an associated push behind the resettlement and consolidation of longhouse communities into centralised villages, thereby facilitating access by development institutions. He relates Malaysia's futuristic development paradigm to an ongoing creation of a civic identity. Malaysia's high-modernist Vision 2020 is epitomised through urban architectural projects in Kuala Lumpur, for example the 'Multimedia Supercorridor' (Cyberjaya). In Sarawak, spatial inscriptions of modernist ideology also take form in rural development programmes (Majid Cooke, 2002), and resource mega-projects, including the recently re-started Bakun hydroelectric project, and I suggest, Borneo Pulp and Paper.

With an economy highly dependent on resource extraction, Sarawak also faces an imminent and sharp decline in logging revenues as a result of three decades of intensive over-harvesting of forests. Discourses and practices of development ideology in Malaysia are thus converging behind a diversification into large-scale agricultural estate crops – particularly oil palm and short-rotation tree plantations – through which investments may be recouped as quickly as possible. Plantation space in Sarawak is being promoted through

the allocation of large and contiguous land concessions, an approach which has continually brought state and private sector agencies into conflict with local people. As I explore below, longhouse communities which claim access to up to 25 per cent of the state on the basis of customary rights, have responded to the displacement accompanying these large-scale plantations development through strategies closer to the idea(l) of 'local resistance'.⁴

THE BORNEO PULP AND PAPER PROJECT

The BPP project was initiated in a 1996 joint venture proposal between the Sarawak state government and Singapore-based Asia Pulp and Paper (APP). As initially conceived, the project would involve a total investment of \$US1.53 billion, producing 750,000 tonnes/year of bleached hardwood kraft pulp from 200,000 hectares of tree plantations. These will be managed in intensive, seven-year rotations, using selectively improved provenances of *Acacia mangium*. The project is situated within a 600,000-hectare concession of logged over, swidden-based and high canopy/high diversity forests in Bintulu Division. BPP is currently well behind schedule, due to the removal of APP from the project (see Barr, 2001 on APP). Vigorous judicial challenges and road blockades from Native longhouses have also resulted in project delays. Fifteen thousand hectares of *Acacia* were planted as of March 2002, however the startup for the pulp mill is now unclear. The Sarawak government has recently placed BPP into receivership to protect their stake in the project, and is now attempting to proceed with domestic investors.

Key to the social conflict surrounding the BPP project is that approximately 28 per cent of the concession area is claimed by Native longhouse communities under Native Customary Rights (NCR) status (Ideal, 1999). This claim potentially involves over 20,000 people, largely ethnic Iban. Perfunctory environmental and social impact assessments have been prepared separately for the plantation and pulp mill component of the project, the latter involving an annexation of land from approximately 1,800 Iban villagers, living in 12 longhouses along the river (*Sungai*) Tatau. Three of the Sg. Tatau longhouses are to be relocated entirely, to a resettlement area located 150 km away at Samarakan, a road-accessible township constructed to house plantation employees. Two other coalitions of Native longhouses have been active in opposition to the BPP project, at the rivers Sekabai and Bawang-Kemena, citing a lack of consultation, land clearing in violation of customary practices and inadequate land compensation packages. In this effort they continue to be aided by concerned Native Sarawakian civil rights lawyers, and through a number of Sarawakian NGOs. Each of the above longhouse groups have filed challenges with the Sarawak High Court, alleging unlawful seizures of NCR land by BPP and the Sarawak Lands and Surveys Department.

For the Iban longhouse communities living along the river Tatau, the resettlement scheme was initiated in a company-led programme in which the longhouse inhabitants feel they have had little control or negotiating position. Indeed, longhouse residents were required to sign an 'unconditional' resettlement

package, which in effect has rallied the longhouses into forming protests and road blockades, and to launching court proceedings. The longhouses to be relocated to Samarakan Township would be allocated RM 50,000⁵ per family to cover the construction of new longhouses, a relocation fee of approximately \$US400, and, in accordance with the resettlement procedures established from the nearby Bakun hydroelectric project, the Superintendent of Land and Surveys is to procure an allocation of three acres of land with provisional lease per family, *after* they have moved into the township. Longhouse residents to be resettled were given two weeks after receiving their compensation packages to evacuate their homes.

During my visit in September 2000, the Sg. Tatau longhouse inhabitants could be considered as falling into three main groups: those who accepted the BPP project and the compensation package (including one longhouse which had signed an agreement and resettled, along with some members from another); those longhouses agreeing to the project in principle, but seeking better compensation, and those who refused the relocation scheme and compensation for the extinguishment of NCR land in its entirety. A major point of contention for the three longhouses facing relocation was the future security of their landholdings (longhouse meeting, Sep. 30, 2000). One longhouse head in particular feared that once they accepted the resettlement plan, and moved to the new township, they would be unable to maintain their dispersed *pulau*.⁶ The longhouses claimed that timber companies had already extracted much of the timber from the *pulau* without paying compensation. The fact that the Land and Surveys Department entered and surveyed land belonging to the longhouse groups without permission, and the company then cleared land without first agreeing upon compensation, both in violation of longhouse *adat*, has resulted in a serious loss of confidence concerning the good faith of state agencies and company negotiators.

After a series of longhouse meetings occurring through September–November 2000, a decision was made by a majority of the headmen of the Sg. Tatau, in consultation with their longhouses, to blockade the pulp mill access roads, and to file a case in the Sarawak High Court challenging the right of the government to appropriate their NCR lands. Their challenge was based upon the loss of longhouse *temuda*,⁷ *menoa*⁸ and *pulau* to company bulldozers, and the failure of the Land and Survey Department to properly notify or consult with the longhouses prior to these actions. The case of the longhouse residents has been strengthened by an unexpected, and potentially precedent-setting decision in the Sarawak High Court at Kuching, in favour of *Rumah* (longhouse) Nor at the Sg. Sekabai (High Court at Kuching, 2001; Majid Cooke, 2003). The 2001 decision ruled that land cleared by Borneo Pulp Plantation and the Sarawak Superintendent of Lands and Surveys was considered by the court as NCR longhouse territory, and was thus cleared unlawfully. The Sarawak state government has responded to the High Court decision, first through appeal,⁹ and second by introducing an unprecedented piece of legislation which would attempt to ban community mapping by unauthorised surveyors (Sahabat Alam Malaysia, 2001), although the status of this bill was unclear at the time of writing.

The longhouses at Sg. Tatau face land seizures with an unconditional compensation package, for what the Lands and Surveys Department has deemed as their customary rights territory. The three longhouses at Sg. Tatau are to be relocated and organised into plantation villages, and to be integrated into a plantation labour force, in which they will be little more than labourers upon land they formerly lived and cultivated. For longhouse inhabitants who are deemed as not able to work productively by company officials, displacement will dramatically heighten risks to well-being and livelihoods. As the BPP resettlement plan is modelled after the misconceived Bakun dam resettlement scheme, it may be considered probable that resettlement would result in similar social stresses for villagers. At Bakun this has involved a removal of food security, an increase in poverty, and a complete loss of access to traditional livelihood strategies and culturally relevant activities for life on the river longhouses, including the farming of hill rice, hunting and fishing (Coalition of Concerned NGOs on Bakun, 1999).

A strong case can be made that dispossession and relocation of longhouse communities under projects such as BPP are unjust, and represent a serious threat to their livelihood. However, I will submit a qualifying aspect to conceptualising local opposition movements to displacement-inducing development projects in Sarawak. This qualifier is also forwarded by Brosuis (1997) and King *et al.* (1998), and is suggestive of the underlying tension between coercion and persuasion in how displacement is achieved on the ground. Longhouses in Bintulu district are amidst a process of increasing integration with commercial markets, with some villages moving physically closer to markets of their own volition. In general, young people in the area have been quick to take opportunities in resource labour markets, and participate widely in the urban and estate-based workforce, including the oil palm plantations and wood industries which have at times displaced their own communities. Some members of the longhouses involved in the BPP dispute for instance, have also taken to establishing small-scale oil palm farms if they hold sufficient start-up capital.

State-backed plantation and agri-business projects in Sarawak are not achieved through the deployment of extreme force, although instances of suppression and police violence have occurred. In between the rhetoric of politicians, aggressive land clearing practices by companies and highly visible acts of local resistance and road blockades, there are also attempts by state agencies to negotiate, to persuade and co-opt longhouse leaders, to offer written contract agreements and enhanced resettlement programmes, to provide conditional health and education services and employment, to undertake environmental and social impact assessments, and so forth. Some villagers remain interested in these development offerings. There also exists political recourse to bargain, block, and to challenge these projects, through negotiation, protest and through the legal system. It is vital to understand that these relationships are negotiated from the widely diverging power relations characteristic of a semi-authoritarian state. Yet, in the midst of these highly visible political struggles, the subtle combination of persuasion and subversion acts in other political moments,

adding layers of local complexity to rural resource struggles. In this sense, I argue that Stoler's (1985: 8) nuanced study of labour regimes in colonial Sumatra's plantation belt, in which she highlights the phenomena of coercion and persuasion '... existing side by side (in stronger or lesser relief) in different moments of economic crisis and political repression', also applies to the present-day complexity of plantation-linked displacement in Sarawak.

TERRITORIALITY, DISPLACEMENT AND RESISTANCE

'Resistance is also a matter of imagining something better than the present order.' Mittelman (2001: 216)

How do these examples help us to understand and situate instances of acquiescence and resistance towards tree plantation development in Southeast Asia? Central to the process of plantation-linked displacement in Sarawak is the allocation of concession rights to business interests with minimal regard for overlapping local resource claims. Native communities are contesting these spatial strategies and challenging Malaysian high-modernist development discourses, through recourse to colonial-implemented laws of *adat*, and an explicitly *indigenous* notion of customary rights. This recourse remains tenuous however, as the legal definition of customary lands can be and has, been altered by the Sarawak government, and local counter-strategies such as community mapping may be undermined. The *de facto* recognition of legally defined customary common property also depends on the ability of the judiciary to uphold state law, and in this sense the recent High Court decision will be a critical test case for shaping the relationship between Native communities and the state in Sarawak.

In Thailand, a more 'open' political system, which includes a greater potential for the involvement of NGOs, has meant that Thai villagers have mounted very successful protest campaigns, which have effectively acted to delay and even immobilise projects involving widespread displacement. State institutions in Thailand are also under greater pressure towards decentralisation, with a lower propensity to articulate and implement the high-modernist development ideology characteristic of Malaysian-style resource mega-projects. The associated emphasis of bringing marginalised and racialised ethnicities into 'mainstream culture' has also been much less prevalent in Thai approaches to promoting plantations.

In the non-Reserve Forest areas of Chachoengsao province, land purchases have often represented the means by which plantation companies have gained access to rural space. Plantation development and displacement have thus become embedded within ongoing, seemingly inexorable processes of agricultural commercialisation. Unlike in Malaysia, in the Thai context there is no history of legal pluralism, nor any official recognition of practices resembling the 'Native Customary Rights' systems of local resource tenure. Even in northern Thailand, arguments for the recognition of minority land rights are most often forwarded not on the basis of a distinct ethnic or indigenous

identity, but through a more inclusive extension of Thai citizenship rights (Vandergeest, 2003). The broader significance of this is that in Thailand, progressive struggles over the recognition of local land and resource rights are less tied to territorially bounded forms of racialised ethnicity (Vandergeest, 2003), and are thus also less exposed to potentially restrictive notions of which groups of people are considered most eligible to receive these rights (see Li, 2001). Further, and contrasted with Sarawak, there has been little judicial activism on land rights in Thailand; there have been no court decisions thus far which uphold the right to common property. Without a distinctive basis for a claim to village resources based on indigenous status, and little in the way of a history of communal land tenure, the defence of common property tenure systems has not been as critical in shaping responses to development-induced displacement in Thailand's eastern seaboard.

CONCLUSION: RE-ENCOUNTERING RESISTANCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA'S PLANTATION SECTOR

Despite twenty years of NGO and local activism around the plantations sector in Southeast Asia, all signs point to continued expansion of plantation production in the region, particularly given its favourable location with respect to China, the country now driving global pulp and paper investment. In the above contexts, community groups and NGO alliances are actively challenging plantation projects which impinge upon local resource access and use, often utilising what have been called 'strategic essentialisms' in building networks of opposition to ecologically and socially unsustainable plantation practices.

I have suggested in this paper that the notion of widespread and unproblematic resistance to plantations based on defence of nature, livelihood and local custom may be overstated. An appreciation of both the local agency and structural constraints through which rural people are resisting, but also entering into plantation relationships and commodity production, opens up new spaces for analysis and political action which supports a geographically embedded view of rural political ecologies. In addition, the area of plantations in Southeast Asia is likely to continue to increase in the future, and this expansion will involve smallholders. By no means is an abandonment of crucial activist efforts advocated here, particularly those based on critiquing the perverse political and financial incentives behind fast-growing plantations, and questioning on moral and ethical grounds an industry that is, in many instances, responsible for the destruction of diverse tropical forests and the displacement of local communities. However, staking a pragmatic political position, which recognises the legitimate interests of villagers and community groups in commercially oriented forestry production, while continuing to work towards the recognition and strengthening of common property systems, may represent an option worth considering. I will also submit that there may be benefits from further grounded ethnographies of globalisation, exploring in more depth the class, gender and racialising dimensions of the enrolment of

rural communities into plantation commodity networks, and, following Brosius (1997), in turn interrogating these generic categories within their culturally and locally defined fields of meaning.

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NOTES

- 1 Sra Kaew province is the home province for one of Thailand's provincial godfathers – Sanoh Thienthong.
- 2 A pseudonym.
- 3 6.25 rai = 1 hectare.
- 4 See Majid Cooke (2002) for a discussion of responses to smallholder development schemes in Sarawak.
- 5 Approximately \$US13,000.
- 6 Areas of forest preserved by the longhouses, often for maintaining useful tree species.
- 7 A term which encompasses farming land and the areas around the vicinity of the longhouse.
- 8 Forest used for hunting and collection purposes.
- 9 The Kuching Court of Appeal has recently deferred judgment on this case, see Malaysiakini (2004).

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