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Anthropological Reflections on Swidden Change in Southeast Asia

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Dear colleagues, allow me first to beg for your forgiveness, and at least to offer my apologies for this unusual beginning to a keynote lecture on swidden—a word successfully resurrected from Old English by Karl-Gustav Izikowitz—otherwise known as shifting cultivation on burned and fallowed land. Why is my introduction in the form of this double request? Because I am going to talk about myself and more particularly, I am going to talk about human preferences. Why am I begging for your forgiveness? Simply because today I am going to be presenting the final public lecture of my life. I must therefore avoid all dishonesty and speak bluntly about what I observe without resorting to the circumlocutions that are customary for anyone who is hoping to be admitted to the holy of holies.

For decades, the social sciences have wanted to model themselves on the natural sciences in emphasizing respect for the same kind of objectivity that the latter observe in their methodology. But the scientist who observes a plant, an animal, or a mineral is outside its being, while the ethnographer is a person who observes other people and the effects of their actions. The form of objectivity that we, then, are subject to, obliges us to keep in mind the observer's own personality, which is to say, we have to "do an ethnography of the ethnographer."

Furthermore, even the most material and materialistic of the activities of the group and the individuals under observation are often set against a background of motivations that the observer will understand better having experienced them personally. Among them are the attraction of, the taste for, and an attraction to some aspects of nature.

Like many boys brought up mostly in the West, it was the ocean, a life at sea, that made me dream and that attracted me. At the dawn of adolescence, I was impressed by the sight of the vast forest. Later, while sharing the lives of swiddeners, I very quickly came to share their deep ties to the forest, their intimacy with and their love for its multiple beauties, but also the difficulty they experienced when confronting the fragrances and even the strong smells that hit you: one's being is subjected to a complex mix of attraction and capture, which only the ocean can match. Taken over in this way, one becomes a happy prisoner of the vast forest in the same way that the press-ganged sailor is a prisoner of the ocean.

The tourist or the hunter who ventures occasionally into the forest can only get a hint of this profound and permanent feeling. The city-dweller who gets lost in the woods senses the fear that is triggered by the Mother Goose tales read to children to make them behave. As they grow up, people who live in the jungle will slowly become familiar with it and will come to know as much about its resources and benefits as they will know about its challenges and its traps. For a child of the swiddens, the forest is more than a manifestation of nature, it is nature herself.

Sedentary people, especially those who are in charge of a development program, are amazed to see the extent to which the *Phii Brêe*, the Forest People, remain deeply attached to the forest and avoid leaving it and changing their way of life. Sedentary people are all the more astonished since they themselves have a deep sense of fear of the forest—a solid, impenetrable space that harbors dangerous and fierce animals, and is inhabited by ghostly beings and deadly fevers… As far as they are concerned, love of the

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forest is proof of the backward mental state and the savage condition that they see in swiddeners. These are "children of the four winds", people who do not stay in their place, who have no fixed residence since they not only move their fields around but they also move their homes: they abandon their village sites, dismantle their homes to rebuild them at another location; they begin the whole process of moving a few years later, and then they do it again and again. This lack of permanence, this lack of roots only serves as proof of their feeble intelligence. It is also believed to be a sign of a lack of attachment to the land, to the soil: they can always move on if we take the land on which they wander (this is where we frequently see sedentary people coming up with a rationale as an excuse for what they are doing when they are looking for land to occupy). People from the plains are far from comprehending their reality: it is true that they do not know that the most important communal festival is the Festival of the Soil and that for semi-nomads, the settlement's land is the most important element of social space.

For their part, semi-nomads consider sedentary people to be somewhat lazy: work in the paddy fields seems to them to be less demanding than felling trees, burning the brushwood, spreading the ash, constant hoeing, maintenance and protecting fields from forest animals; not to mention that sedentary people always live in the same place and cultivate the same piece of land, so sparing themselves the tiring task of moving. But mountain people are impressed by their wealth in salt, in weapons and metal containers and all kinds of jars, and they see sedentary people as being smart, very smart because of the clever ways they find to exchange them to their own advantage. In the past, there was the additional factor of the fear instilled by the history of raids on villages in the plains near the forest and the extremely violent punitive reactions they provoked. Fear was, of course, reciprocated, with the rice farmers believing that swiddeners were unpredictable and cruel savages.

Furthermore, the huge clouds of smoke that rose over the forest towards the end of the dry season represented a menace to the farmers because they were the huge fires that prepared the swidden plots. Fire, although only humans are privileged to use it as a tool, is always seen to be a threat, especially in this context where it is coming from men who are believed to be unpredictable and cruel. There is also the fear that the fires will not be controlled and that they will ravage a large part of the forest, precisely that part of the forest that could produce fruit, medicinal plants, and products that could be traded.

The gap that divides the two groups is wider still because the people of the mountains and their neighbors hold opposing views about their respective activities. For the mountain people, their way of farming is evidence of the success of man's strength, his awareness and knowledge of the environment. The great Baap Can of Sar Luk had a reputation as a *kuang baa*: a powerful man valued for the rice [he produced]. By contrast, I have often heard paddy farmers being described as lazy because in the eyes of mountain people, they spend much less time and effort on their paddy fields than they themselves spend on their rice fields—which is not incorrect. Besides, they are convinced that their form of production is superior to their neighbors'. The proof: "When we go to buy salt, it is during breaks in the work cycle. For them, they will come to us to offer us salt in exchange for rice in times of hunger. With us, when there is a shortage in one of our villages, the men will go to get some rice from a neighboring village that has had more luck, but we don't go down to the farmers." Remember how when you have reached a certain level of friendship with a settled Vietnamese or Thai, you will be invited to a meal during which your host will praise the fragrance of the rice, which will have come from farmers in the mountains.

In addition to the high productivity in paddy of the swidden, a number of vegetables are grown on the plot as well as rice: all kinds of cucurbits, cassava, maize, peppers, bananas, yams, as well as plants used for textiles, especially indigo, all of which grow densely on the edges of the swidden plot or close to the shelter from which the crops are guarded.

As for fire, they take great care to prevent it from spreading into the surrounding forest. Before burning the brushwood, they surround the field—communal or individual—with a firebreak and as long as the fire is not completely extinguished, young people walk around with branches to put out even the smallest tongue of flame.

Another key point: they take great care to manage the soil and its fertility. They will usually only use one plot for a year or two, rarely more, in order to allow the forest to regenerate and to be covered again in an abundance of plants from shrubs to the large trees, which will in turn, after one or two dozen years, yield a soil enriched with ash, its natural fertilizer.

What is most astonishing about the fear that lowland rice farmers have about the effects of burning the felled forest, is that on those occasions when they clear and burn a patch of forest, they take few precautions and they will exploit the same patch of land for years on end until the soil is exhausted. The places where they have been can be recognized by the completely unusable lateritic soils.

Well-managed swidden makes it possible to use land that would otherwise be unusable for other forms of agriculture, such as steeply sloping land. The care with which swiddeners look after the soil allows them to prepare fields on steep slopes. Because they are obliged to maintain areas of water, it is a major undertaking for rice farmers who want to deal with the same terrain to transform the slopes into terraces; what is more, the terraces require continuous and difficult maintenance. Even then, people will resort to opening some swidden to supplement their food resources.

In many mountain civilizations where basins and small plateaus are used for paddy rice, swidden continues to be an important source of nutrition for the population, as well as the source of products and services used in many other activities: pasture, crafts, and all too often one forgets about the pleasure of going into the forest supposedly to hunt or to gather. When complementary swidden is anchored in the cultural customs of the group, it is always accompanied by strict measures taken to prevent fire and exhaustion of the soil.

Whatever the advantages of swidden might be for those who practice it, it suffers from a huge handicap because of the need to have large areas of land available to *nomadify*, if I may call it that, their cropping and their dwellings. Furthermore, when one large contiguous space is transformed by large scale public works (e.g. the deltas of North Vietnam as presented by Pierre Gourou), these have allowed for impressive demographic development situated in a historic civilization. When all this is taken together with a general tendency only to see the evolution of technology and knowledge as linear and continuous, it means that sedentary people naturally consider swidden to be a primitive system.

It is true that today a person who discovers something immediately announces it, if only to be able to take out a patent and to claim royalties. But let us imagine the expanse of forests and jungles and the numbers of rivers and swamps that used to cover Southeast Asia in its most inclusive sense, that fed the natural terraces scattered inside them where standing water teemed with weeds, one of which was paddy. One can believe that in those scattered groups of humans there were some individuals, here and there, who were tempted to taste and to adapt these grains. Among them, in places that were far apart, on dry outcrops, some would have tried to acclimatize it in the same way that others before them had cultivated millet and, in some locations in Southeast Asia, Job's tears.

These experiments all ended either in failure or in success, with the next generation learning from these trials and errors or with neighbors learning by imitation; learning either by conquerors or by their subjects, they were copied more or less successfully, transmitted or modified in a clumsy way or successfully. The outcome of this process of trial and error varied from one place to the next, subject to innovations or to unfortunate mistakes and the level of daring or cleverness of these apprentice researchers from a distant time living far from each other. Hence the origin of the extraordinary variation in swiddening techniques: on individual fields or grouped into collective plots, dispersed or clustered. We find, for example, particularly carefully managed holdings along with paddies with little construction, the former having developed with more care than the latter.

Despite all this, sedentary people, both colonial technical staff and farmers in the plains, show little consideration for and even despise swidden. Yet one hears little of the centuries during which the Mayan civilization ruled over Central America, which is strewn with their masterpieces. The colonial administration did not know, for example, that swidden had played a major role in the demographic expansion of the twelfth century in France: it transformed vast areas into cultivated fields of cereals. It was also the case that swidden was widespread in Europe during the nineteenth century, and it is also mentioned as existing in Austria during the 1960s. If you walk through the forest of Fontainebleau you will come across many sites or hamlets with the name "l'Essart" or "Essart" (swidden) on the survey maps.

Nevertheless, however one looks at it, the need for space in which to shift the swiddens is a major handicap for swidden cultivation. The extraordinary demographic growth that has marked the contemporary period has significantly reduced the available space. This has forced swiddeners to extend the time that each plot is cultivated, in turn reducing the productivity of the soil and further reducing the availability of land. The impacts of worldwide growth in population has been aggravated by the catastrophes of the wars of the twentieth century, particularly in Vietnam where the ravages of war have been made worse by terrifying technical inventions: napalm, anti-personnel mines, defoliants.

In the face of collective fears for the future, some decades ago we saw governments deciding to ban all forest clearance for cultivation, without even trying to find alternative crops. However, in those places where swiddeners were encouraged to establish tea or coffee plantations that proved to be successful, giving them the means to purchase growing stock and even to prosper, they have been imitated: tea and coffee have become alternative crops and have made it possible to reduce the area of swidden.

Traditional swidden, which has been systematically attacked in some countries, never reached the gigantic scale of the colossal deforestation carried out to establish plantations of rubber or oil palm, and most recently to extract high-value timber from hectare upon hectare of ravaged forest; or even, as in South America, to create huge expanses of grazing land. This vast, industrialized deforestation is not only far more destructive than the swidden cultivation practiced by small communities, but it also succeeds in blocking attempts that are made to slow it down; it is carried out with the backing of considerable capital from which investors expect to make large financial profits.

This is in a context where the swidden cultivation that we are looking at allows for the survival of modest-sized groups of humans. They cannot be eliminated in a systematic, authoritarian way because their many and varied models are a testimony to the creative richness of humans as social beings. Any human experience that seeks to improve living conditions deserves to be studied very closely in the search for balanced solutions.