

A. Small Farmers: Introduction

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Frantz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann explore below the close relation between forms of property holding and other aspects of economic, social, and political life in two Indonesian groups, the Minangkabau and the Ambonese. Both groups have long colonial histories (Ambon in particular), produce goods for supraregional markets, and have high rates of formal education. As groups who have maintained considerable local autonomy despite pressure from the colonial and, later, nation-state governments of Indonesia, they provide a useful context for considering case studies of groups undergoing rapid and disruptive change.

Anan Ganjanaphan examines the complex and discouraging results of an effort by the government of Thailand to issue land title deeds to small farmers in the northern provinces. He argues that government efforts to increase security of tenure actually decreased it, because government planners did not understand the local situation and local practices of land tenure. Erman Rajagukguk examines the plight of Javanese farmers who were evicted from their lands by the government in order to make way for a dam project but whose continuing presence in the area has forced the government to take account of their needs.

A comparison of these essays raises questions about when, and under what circumstances, local groups can preserve or recover their autonomy in the face of economic pressures from capitalist developers and political pressures from centralizing nation-states. Can groups reclaim a measure of autonomy as people acquire experience in dealing with powerful outsiders, as suggested by the Minangkabau and Ambonese cases? Or are the pressures becoming more intense and harder for local groups to resist, as suggested by the experience of groups dealing with rapid, forced change? Most conference participants seemed to believe that the forces of change are becoming more disruptive

of local life-ways than in the past. Suvit Rungvisai, for example, argues that efforts by the Thai government to use law as a way of ameliorating the wealth disparities caused by capitalist development have not had the intended effect. The Thai government has been unable to pass and enforce laws to abolish exploitive sharecropping arrangements and distribute land more equally.