

REFRAMING INDIGENOUS FARMING IN THE AGE OF NEOLIBERAL AGRARIAN CHANGE: LESSONS FROM SABAH, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses the influence of neoliberal agricultural policy on the changes in agricultural practices amongst the indigenous farmers in Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia. As the main rice-producing area in Sabah, the agriculture sector in Kota Belud is significantly changing. However, why such changes have occurred and what do these changes mean to the practices of indigenous farmers are largely unknown. Based on semi-structured and in-depth interviews with farmers and local leaders in Kampung Piasau, Kota Belud, this paper demonstrates the main factors identified as having the greatest impact on the agricultural sector in Kota Belud. The influence of privatisation and free-market economy has brought about modernisation in the farming sector, leading to the erosion of collective values and social capital that farmers have long practised. This influence also has promoted the notion of neoliberal policies that ‘modern’ society and agriculture are more rational than indigenous agricultural practices, a rationale that is built around ‘western’ logic rather than tradition. However, research findings do not fully support this notion as some informants expressed strong confidence towards the need to revitalise traditional farming practices in paddy cultivation activities, although many of them are no longer practised. Overall, the influence of neoliberal agricultural policy has brought significant changes to the farming community in Kota Belud. Some are desired, and some are less desired changes, but all affect the process and purpose of agrarian change.

Keywords: *Neoliberal agricultural policy, indigenous farmer, agricultural practices, modernisation, marketisation, social mobility.*

INTRODUCTION

Over several decades, the rapid ideological evolution of neoliberalism has significantly influenced the agrarian sector in most countries worldwide. This evolution allows the corporate agri-food system to control domestic agriculture and market-led agrarian reform (Stone & Glover, 2017); change the agricultural sector governance (Pritchard, 2005); and altered livelihood strategies amongst indigenous farmers (Goto & Douangngeune, 2017). With the restructuring in agriculture using the logic of efficiency, profit orientation, and technological advancements, indigenous farmers have continued to lose access to resources, particularly agricultural land (Madgoff et al., 2000). The spread of neoliberalism in the farming sector will pose a threat to food security when indigenous farmers lost their access to land for food crops over commercial crops.

The indigenous people have a special attachment to and use of their agricultural land, which has fundamental importance for their food production and survival. The indigenous people's traditional knowledge and practices in its various forms such as customs, rules and regulations, and traditional protected areas are the essential mechanisms in controlling and maintaining access to resources (especially land) and food (Johnny et al., 2015; Boafu et al., 2016; Marsden, 2013; Altieri, 2009. See also, Suadik et al., 2015). Indigenous people also have their agriculture and food systems and various indigenous strategies to sustain productivity in their production systems such as crop rotation, mixed cropping, and soil fertility management (Magcale-Macandog & Ocampo, 2005). However, the literature shows that the traditional methods of indigenous people in managing their land are breaking down (Magcale-Macandog & Ocampo, 2005; Siahaya et al., 2016; Bryceson et al., 2000; Bernstein, 2004). This event is not only due to the narrow view of heritage management (Altman & Jackson, 2008), population increases (Magcale-Macandog & Ocampo, 2005; ICIMOD, 2003), the declining interest of younger people in farming (Siahaya et al., 2016), but also the policies of neoliberalism (Soper, 2019; Bryceson et al., 2000; Bernstein, 2004).

Neoliberal ideology and policies became increasingly influential in Malaysia's agricultural policies, especially after 1980, when the government

decided to divert development policies' focus on the industrial and trade sectors. The implementation of agricultural policy in Malaysia has begun since before independence. Before independence (1948–1957), the agricultural policy was formulated by and for the British colonial (Abu Dardak, 2015). After independence in 1957, the Malaysian Government has implemented four more policies as a strategic direction for the agricultural and food sector, namely the National Agricultural Policy 1, 2, 3 (NAP 1–3) and the National Agro-food Policy 4 (NAP 4) (Abu Dardak, 2015; Bakri et al., 2016). Although, some scholars argue that Malaysian development policies have been ineffective in addressing food security issues and challenges (see, for example, Bakri et al., 2016), but according to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2018), in 2017, the agricultural sector contributed at least 8.2% or RM96.0 billion to Malaysia's gross domestic product. It has also generated employment opportunities for the rural population. The total number of employed persons in this sector in 2017 gained by 21.7 thousand (1.3%), from 1,609.9 thousand in 2016 to 1,631.6 thousand in 2017. In the NAP 4, much emphasis has been given to address global challenges, including economic liberalisation and rising in the world trade uncertainty.

In Sabah, the development of the agricultural sector has been an essential means to help the rural population escape poverty (SDC Blueprint, 2007). Up to 376,000 or 33% of all employed persons in Sabah were involved in agriculture, the second largest contributor in terms of employment across all industries after services (SDC Blueprint, 2007). Meanwhile, a total of 2.1 million hectares of land area in Sabah are agricultural land, and 1.4 million hectares of which have already been developed (SDC Blueprint, 2007). The Department of Agriculture estimated that approximately 322,600 hectares of this agricultural land is suitable for paddy cultivation (*Daily Express*, 2018). This agricultural land area will enable Sabah to have adequate rice supplies for domestic and foreign sources (Idris, 2018). The influence of neoliberal agricultural policies has led to neoregulation in the local food system and rapid growth in agricultural imports and exports in Sabah (Noorasvilla, 2019). Pietilainen and Otero (2018) stated that the neoregulation would involve state interventions to help free trade and private investment, enveloping the use of state security forces as the escort of free-market capitalism, including a growing food-import dependency. The value of Sabah's import of rice in 2012

is approximately 35 times higher than in 1962 (Idris, 2018). In terms of rice import in tonne, the quantity of imports in 2012 is 8.7 times greater than that in 1962. Despite being heavily dependent on imports, Sabah's agricultural sector remains significant as a primary source of export revenue until 2019 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2019).

Previous studies showed that neoliberal agricultural policy, local issues, and culture (Moseley et al., 2010); technological change (Madgoff et al., 2000); as well as politics (Nyantakyi-Frimpong, 2017) are among the causes of social change in rural areas. This study focuses on the effect of the neoliberal agricultural policy on the agricultural practices of the Dusun Tindal farming community in Kota Belud, Sabah. This study consists of five sections, including the Introduction and Conclusion. The second section discusses research methods that were used for data collection.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is based on the preliminary findings from a pilot study that was conducted in Kampung Piasau, Kota Belud, Sabah. Purposive and random sampling procedures were used to select the research area, key informants, and informants. Kota Belud district was chosen because changes in the farming practices due to the spread of neoliberal agricultural policy in the local food system are evidently observed in this district compared with the other districts in Sabah. As the "rice bowl" of Sabah, Kota Belud is one of the major crop production centres in the state (*The Borneo Post*, 2018), and this district had the largest land area for rice cultivation. This area covers 22.5% of 9,392.0 hectares of Sabah's total agricultural land area. Kampung Piasau was selected because this village is amongst the most important rice-growing areas in Kota Belud. In-depth and semi-structured interviews were carried out involving Dusun Tindal farming communities and the local leaders. In-depth interviews were held with three of the key informants that are amongst the local leaders and well-experienced personnel in the subject being studied. A total of five indigenous farmers who are also well-experienced and actively engaged in paddy farming activities participated in the semi-structured interviews during the research. Data were analysed using content analysis.

CHANGES IN THE MOTIVE OF PRODUCTION AND PERCEPTION

Due to the influence of neoliberal policies in the agricultural sector in Sabah, the allocation of most agricultural incentive is towards the agricultural product that will make a higher economic profit. Therefore, more agricultural inputs have been introduced by the government and several non-governmental organisations in wet paddy cultivation because wet paddy is proven to have a better possible return than upland paddy. The development of wet paddy cultivation aims to improve the farmers' standard of living and further develop the rural areas and communities engaged mainly in the agricultural sector. Indeed, the situation has increased rice production to fulfil market demand, but it has also changed the traditional motive of paddy production as a social safety net amongst the farmers.

The intention to eliminate the shifting cultivation system has started since Malaysia's independence. When the Sabah Government sought to eradicate this type of agricultural practice by encouraging wet rice farming, wet rice farming had become the primary subsistence economy of the Dusun Tindal farmers in Kampung Piasau. Moreover, shifting cultivation as the most important economic component in traditional agriculture was no longer being practised (Mr. Manag Muing, interview, 15 September 2019) as shifting cultivation had gradually ended in Kampung Piasau since the 1960's. In 2014, although some of the farmers still cultivated upland rice, none of them utilises the shifting cultivation method in their farming activity (Suadik & Karulus, 2010). This attempt to end shifting cultivation has led to the changes in the farming practices of the indigenous farmers to become not greatly dependent on this traditional farming system, which is said to adopt a low level of agricultural technology (Ngidang et al., 2003; Schulze & Suratman, 1999. See also, Tahir & Abd Talip, 2020).

The development programmes focused on wet paddy agriculture have brought much significant technology transformation in this type of farming, which then increased its commercial value. The adoption of new technology in wet rice farming had risen rapidly and even more when the local agriculture was exposed to a broader food supply chain in the neoliberal era. Traditionally, rice production in Kampung Piasau aimed at meeting the needs of the

household. As a social safety net for the village members, rice production has become a crucial strategy of the villagers to prevent the occurrence of famine and strengthen their community resilience for food security. Nowadays, farmers in Kampung Piasau tend to focus mainly on wet rice farming for income generation by selling their paddy production in the market. Most informants consider their participation in the free-market economy as their essential income sources (Bimbah Hula, interview 18 September 2019; Diki Bindih, interview 16 September 2019; Nong Guna, interview 18 September 2019; Nora Singang, interview 17 September 2019).

The farmers' participation in the free market economy makes profit the main production motive and factor of encouragement of the indigenous farmers in doing their agricultural activities. As a consequence, in 2019, upland rice farming has no longer being practised by farmers. According to the informants, they choose not to cultivate upland rice because cultivating upland rice is more complicated than the wet paddy, thereby not worthy of being sold to the market (Gita Pangsi, interview 16 September 2019; Minoh Daha, interview 17 September 2019; Sindih Alun, interview 15 September 2019). Upland rice farming was considered not economically viable as the difference between the selling price of wet rice and upland rice is not very significant. This situation shows that most farmers in this village place a high value on the efforts they put in their farming activity, and the most effective method to estimate the profit and loss value of their efforts is through cash flow calculation during the production process.

CHANGES IN FARMING PRACTICES

The process of neoliberal marketisation and modernisation in the agricultural sector has caused changes in indigenous farmers' farming practices. The traditional Dusun Tindal socioeconomic activities are closely related to their belief systems. The customary law embedded in the belief system of the farmers has a strong influence on their farming practices. This customary law has upheld and preserved the old values in rice farming. However, traditional rice farming rituals and customs are now gradually forgotten. For example, the rituals of *manangkala* and *timbu-timbuan* as a traditional solution to overcome

the problems and challenges in rice cultivation, such as slow growth of paddy, crop diseases carried by insects and the bad effect of a climate change, were no longer practised by the farmers. Farmers' belief on traditional taboos about avoiding noise during 'the chasing off birds' season has also no longer been practised as sound-making kites were used to scare the birds away. As admitted by the informants during the interviews, they choose not to perform and comply with any traditional rituals and taboos nowadays as they believe that those practices are no more effective in addressing the problems at the farm. However, although the practices have become increasingly forgotten, many informants strongly agree with the idea of revitalising traditional practices in their farming activities.

Presently, farmers no longer regard tradition as a basic essential of any activity in paddy farming. The old sowing practice (*monotok* for instance) is hardly seen nowadays as farmers are highly inclined to plant shoots and direct seeding. Only in some condition where the paddy seed does not grow on the paddy plots from indirect seeding, then the farmers go back to the traditional seeding methods. Even then, this process is usually done on the edge of the field to ease the process of moving the seedling to the main field. The informants admitted that the direct seeding method by shooting the paddy seed is indeed contrary to their traditional customs and beliefs. This event could offend the *Bambaraion*, a paddy spirit which they believed resides in the rice plant. However, according to the informants, nowadays, customary violations were no longer deemed to cause any calamity and would not affect their harvest.

Another traditional farming practice of the Dusun Tindal farmers rooted in indigenous tradition and their traditional knowledge is the significant role of *Bobolian*, a high priestess and ritual specialist (Low & Solehah, 2018). The farmers believe that *Bobolian* is able to connect and communicate with the supernatural world. Hence, the most crucial role of the *Bobolian* with regard to farming activities is to be an intermediary between the world of human beings and the spiritual world. The *Bobolian* was therefore highly respected in the community. Gradual changes that have taken place have made the new farming generation in Kampung Piasau became less dependent on old traditions, specifically *Bobolian*. The traditional religious ceremonies carried

out by farmers in the past were replaced by new rituals from Christianity or Islam, which were considered by the farmers as more developmentally friendly than their traditional beliefs and customs. Therefore, according to the informants, *Bobolian* guidance is no longer presently referred by the farmers for any agricultural activities.

CONCLUSION

As the agricultural sector in Malaysia faces new challenges due to the rapid institutional and ideological evolution of neoliberalism, economic deregulation, and trade liberalisation, the agricultural sector requires new strategies and policies to address the challenges. Therefore, neoliberal ideology has become the leading and dominant factor in policy formulation in Malaysia. According to Monbiot (2016), neoliberalism ideology will not only defend, bolsters, and justifies social and economic disparities under capitalism, but also dominates peoples' lives. In Kota Belud, changes in the agricultural sector due to the influence of neoliberal agricultural policies led to the evolution of a free market economy and privatisation in agriculture. This event has brought modernisation to the rice farming agriculture, leading to the erosion of collective values and social capital that the farmers have long practised. Moreover, this event has promoted the notion of neoliberal policies that 'modern' society and agriculture are more rational than indigenous agricultural practices, a rationale that is built around 'western' logic rather than tradition. The research findings do not fully support this notion as many informants expressed strong beliefs towards the need to revitalise traditional farming practices in paddy cultivation activities, although many of them are no longer practised. Overall, the influence of neoliberal agricultural policy has brought significant changes to the farming communities in the research area. Some are desired (such as social mobility), and some are less desired changes, but all affect the process and purpose of agrarian change—not only affecting the economic system but also on the way of life of the indigenous farmers. If the goal is to protect some elements of indigenous practices of farming, then agricultural policies must be reframed by recognising and enabling indigenous communities to play a meaningful role in enhancing social equity and environmental sustainability.

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