

BOOK REVIEW

Voices from the Forests: Integrating Indigenous Knowledge into Sustainable Upland Farming

Edited by Malcolm Cairns
826 pages

Juan M. Pulhin

University of the Philippines Los Baños

Email:

Voices from the Forest provides a robust defense against the largely undeserved bad reputation associated with shifting cultivation that has persisted for almost a century. Bringing together the best of science and farmer experimentation, the book illustrates the enormous diversity and dynamism of this highly resilient long-established agricultural system. It provides a striking testimony of human ingenuity, chronicling how an ancient agricultural technology remains adaptable until the present despite intense pressures from the burgeoning population, state interventions, and an increasingly globalized market economy.

Voices from the Forests is edited by Malcolm Cairns, Researcher at the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies of the Australian National University. It provides an exemplary, comprehensive collection of valuable research-generated materials, of recent vintage, on shifting cultivation (or swidden farming). More than ten years in the making, the book appears to be unprecedented in its scope with more than 100 scholars from 22 countries — including

anthropologists, agronomists, agricultural economists, and ecologists — collaborating in the analyses and the writing of the different indigenous approaches to fallow management in the Asia-Pacific Region. The book derived its contents from a regional workshop entitled, “Indigenous Strategies for Intensification of Shifting Cultivation in Southeast Asia” which was organized by the World Agroforestry Center (ICRAF) in 1997 in Bogor, Indonesia. Its writing was inspired by the authors’ intent “To make indigenous practices and experience more widely accessible and better understood, not only by researchers and development practitioners, but also by other communities of farmers around the world”.

The 826-page book has a total of 69 chapters divided into ten parts. The first three introductory chapters, written by the top experts in the field — Dennis P. Garrity of ICRAF, Harold Brookfield of ANU, and the Editor, Malcolm Cairns — provide an excellent overview on the subject and are highly recommended to all readers before plunging into the details of the subsequent chapters. Parts II to XIII, covering

a total of 59 chapters, present detailed case studies representing the different typologies of “Indigenous Fallow Management” (IFM) practiced in the Asia-Pacific Region. Categorized based on the length of their fallow period, these indigenous technologies are: 1) semi/permanent agroforests (5–200 years); 2) perennial-annual crop rotations (3–30 years); 3) dispersed tree fallows (3–20 years); 4) retention/promotion of preferred volunteered species (5–20 years); 5) shrub-based accelerated fallows (1–4 years); and 6) herbaceous legumes (0.25–3 years). Readers interested in the specifics of these practices as they are employed by upland communities in different countries will find these chapters instructive.

Part IX moves from the specifics of IFM to the broader issues of property rights, markets, and institutions. Readers, particularly the social scientists, will find this section particularly interesting in terms of understanding the broader context that shapes the socioeconomic and environmental outcomes of IFM. Finally, the last part provides a comprehensive and excellent synthesis that brings closure to the volume by answering key questions which are at the heart of understanding and appreciating the role of improved fallow management in swidden agricultural systems. Authored by another highly respected scholar in the field, Tery Rambo from Khon Kaen University, this chapter through its incisive analysis and forward-looking perspective, arguably provides the greatest “added value” to the entire collection and therefore needs careful digesting from all readers.

Irrefutably, *Voices from the Forests* breaks new ground in terms of advancing our knowledge and appreciation of the complexity, dynamics, and the role of indigenous fallow management in swidden agricultural systems. It also poses a great challenge both to the scientific community and the governments in the Asia-Pacific on how to better facilitate the

integration of indigenous knowledge into the evolving upland farming practices to minimize the problems brought about by the imbalance of people and resources in the uplands. In terms of writing style and language, the book is well-written and presented in simple language which makes it readily accessible for general readership, even to those with very limited background on the subject matter. It is no doubt among the finest contributions in the field of swidden farming which include among others, the 1957 seminal work of Harold Conklin on the *Hanunoo Agriculture in the Philippines* and the 1981 collection of papers by Harold Olofson about *Adaptive Strategies and Change in Philippine Swidden-based Societies* — to name a few.

Despite its pronounced strengths, the book has its own limitations. First, it appears to be overly ambitious in its objective of making “indigenous practices and experience more widely accessible and better understood... by other communities of farmers around the world.” I have serious doubt about how a scholarly publication such as this which is written in English can be made available to farming communities across the globe, in the absence of concrete and comprehensive knowledge management and dissemination strategies. Second, the title *Voices from the Forests* is quite confusing. It is unclear to me whose voices are being referred to in the title. If my assumption is right—that is, the intent of the book is to privilege the voices of the shifting cultivators—then, I believe the authors are unsuccessful in this regard. For one, of the more than 100 authors, only Damrong Tayanin from Lao P.D.R. (author of Chapter 6) is a shifting cultivator himself. Moreover, while the book may have engaged thousands of shifting cultivators in the research process, their involvement had been mainly as provider of information during surveys and, thus, their voices were rarely heard or represented in the

actual data analysis. Except for a few who presented and validated their research findings to the farmers (e.g., Chapter 18) or indicated the intent of working with farmers to develop a more problem-oriented research agenda (Chapter 30), most chapter authors have silenced the voice of the swidden farmers and have privileged their own voice. Furthermore, in terms of recency, since most of the studies were conducted from 1994 to 1997 and considering the 10-year gestation period of the book, some of the data and methods employed in the different studies may now be outmoded. Finally, the more recent issues confronting swidden farming and the global agricultural systems in general such as biodiversity and climate change are not given attention in the volume. Notwithstanding these limitations, this volume proves to be one of the most valuable materials on swidden farming currently available; hence, it is essential reading for academics, students, researchers, policymakers, and development workers.

REFERENCES

- Conklin, H. 1957. "Hanunoo Agriculture in the Philippines". *FAO Forestry Development Paper* No. 12. Rome: U. N. Food and Agriculture Organization.
- Olofson, H. 1981. *Adaptive Strategies and Change in Philippine Swidden-based Societies*. Laguna, Philippines: Forest Research Institute.

