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## Shifting Cultivation and tribal culture, a case study of tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, India

\*Tomo RIBA<sup>1</sup>, Kazuo ANDO<sup>2</sup> and Yashuyuki KOSAKA<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Department of Geography Rajiv Gandhi University INDIA,

<sup>2</sup>Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University Japan

<sup>3</sup>Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, Japan

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### Introduction:

Shifting cultivation is the most commonly practiced type of agriculture by the majority people of Arunachal Pradesh, India (Photo 1). Before the introduction of wet cultivation, it was called *rwkv*, means agriculture. But after the introduction of wet cultivation, it is called *mo'di rwkv* or *tumpv rwkv* (hill or dry agriculture) and other one is called *isi rwkv* or *paata rwkv*, means wet or pond agriculture by the Galo. Many scientists who blamed shifting cultivation for various environmental degradations, after failure of their recommended alternative system of occupation, now have softer views about shifting cultivation. They saw only the flames and smoke of one day, and failed to see rest of the year; what farmers are performing on other days. Many used belittling terms while defining shifting cultivation as primitive, slash and burn, poor and minority ethnic groups, subsistence, etc. and never tried to see them sympathetically. They (who go in their car and depend more on so many non-degradable items) failed to compare themselves with the shifting cultivators, in respect to the amount of environmental pollution created. Finding no suitable alternative which would take the exact place of shifting cultivation, today anthropologist call it a way of life, tradition and culture; Economists call it a best form of sustenance for hill people as there is no better alternatives; Geographers call it a best man-nature adjustment in hill topography. Ecologists call farmers a maintainer of plant diversity. Environmentalist says, farmer don't only cut trees only, but also grow.



Photo 1 Shifting Cultivation Field

Thus, a single type of definition cannot be used for all forms of shifting cultivation all over the world. Felling of trees, use of fire to clear the fallen trees, cropping and leave to fallow are being common, there are lot difference in methods and techniques of cultivation, crops grown, food habits and other cultural attachment. Scientists must try to understand the underlying forces due to which it is difficult to dissuade the shifting cultivators in spite of attempt to wane them by international, national and local agencies. There is a much intricacies and needs deeper and wiser understanding. It not only agriculture, but also the identity of a society is very much embedded in it. This paper is an attempt to show that the emotional attachment like culture and traditions; and food habits are some of the strong factors that farmers are not ready to change it and make them to revert to old system repeatedly.

### Methodology:

The first author's knowledge about shifting cultivation of the area forms a firsthand source of information that he gathered through participation in cultivation, being belongs to Jhumias family. More over guiding of many students in their postgraduate dissertation and doctorate degree gives him better comparisons. Further, the experience of two Japanese co-authors during their several visits to these areas helps in forming a global comparison.

## Discussions:

Arunachal Pradesh, the north easternmost part of India is a land of hills and mountain with deep gorges dissected by numerous perennial rivers flowing from Himalaya in the north to south. Altitude ranges from 150 m in the foot hills in the south to 7000 m. in the north. It is one of the wettest part of the country due to moisture laden wind from Bay of Bengal and the

presence of Himalaya which prevents further northward movement of moist wind and compels orographic rainfall in the area. The annual average rainfall in Arunachal Pradesh is more than 300 cm. Heavy rainfall and warm temperature have favored for growth of evergreen forest in maximum part of the state. Vegetation types ranges from tropical forest in the foothills, to sub-tropical forests, pine forests and temperate forests in the mid zones to alpine forests in the north.

The hilly terrain, isolation location, poor transport and communication connectivity; and very low level of technological development, altogether have placed the state behind other parts of the country in various aspects. It is hundred percent tribal inhabited state. Among the traditional system that remained without any external change is the shifting cultivation, practiced by majority of the people of the state.

For these people, shifting cultivation is their culture and religion. It has become a way of life and traditions for these people. House types, food habits, techniques of hunting and fishing, knowledge about the different types of plants and other organisms, myths related to origin of man, festivals, rituals, counting of seasons, year of reference of child birth, marriage, and other events; sentiments and emotions are related to their agriculture. That is the reason why, many people in spite of having sufficient settled agriculture still practice shifting cultivation.

These people grow variety of crops in the same field and also collect lot wild vegetables. Their system of cooking is very simple. They don't use oil and spices in food. They boil, barbecue, roast, bake and use different items as taste maker. That is the reason why even staying in urban centers, still these people cook as per their rational style. They have their own techniques of preservation of food.

The centuries of interaction with the forest, have made these people to learn behavior of animals and have devised so many techniques of hunting to protect crops. These are designed out of locally available materials which are naturally degradable itself. Even in fishing, they use numerous eco-friendly techniques. They use different herbs to cure themselves and domestic animals and to kill fish in the rivers.

Another field where farmers excel is the crafts items they make for their day to day use. They make beautiful baskets and weave colorful clothes for themselves. The agricultural tools, construction of farm hut, rising of fence, rearing of domestic animals, songs and dances are related to their agricultural practices. They can accurately calculate the different seasons of year.

Above mentioned cultural attachment along with the paucity suitable land for settled agriculture compel these people to cling to shifting cultivation in spite of numerous hardships. But one day it will die itself along with its culture.



Photo 2 Mithun



Photo 3 Style to  
the forest



Photo4 Traditional houses



Photo5 Local made equipments

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