

Geertz C. *Agricultural involution: the processes of ecological change in Indonesia*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963. 176 p.

This book is a study of agrarian change in Indonesia over several hundred years. It argues that the understanding of such change depends on an integration of ecological and sociological points of view. The main thesis is that wet rice agriculture in Indonesia has developed through a process of an over-elaboration of labor intensive methods of cultivation leading to "static expansion." [The *A&HCI*®, the *SCI*®, and the *SSCI*® indicate that this book has been cited in more than 420 publications.]

## Change Without Progress in a Wet Rice Culture

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*Agricultural Involution* is an unusual book for an anthropologist to have written. It takes not a particular people, tribe, or village as its object, but an entire country, and a literate, culturally developed one at that. It is strongly historical in nature, reaching back to the nineteenth century and before to explain contemporary phenomena. It develops a very strong thesis out of a particular theoretical tradition—cultural ecology. And it represents an attack on both neoclassical and Marxist explanations of economic change in Third World countries. Thus, it is perhaps not so surprising that it launched a debate that has lasted now for nearly 30 years and involved literally dozens of scholars from a number of countries.<sup>1-4</sup>

It also is unusual in that, though its thesis was applied to Indonesia as a whole, it arose out of ethnographic work in and around a small town in eastern Java. The capacity of the wet rice regime there to absorb an increasing labor force into a more or less static socio-technological structure, a process I compared to treading water, led me to propose that this sort of change without progress had been going on in Java for some centuries. I borrowed the concept of "involution" from the American anthropologist Alexander Goldenweiser.<sup>5</sup> He had used it to describe cultural forms—Gothic architecture, Maori carving—that, having reached a definitive form, continued to develop by becoming internally more complicated. Here, I attempted to explain how such increasing internal complexity had taken place in the sedentary wet rice agriculture of Java as opposed to the dry rice shifting cultivation regimes in the rest of Indonesia.

The book was originally intended as a prolegomena to a general analysis of Indonesian society. But after I published it, such a project seemed premature, so I more or less set it aside and addressed myself to a series of other issues in Indonesian sociology. As a result, its very close relation to my work overall has tended to go unnoticed, and the book has become something of an orphan with a special history of its own. When I go about the country speaking at universities, the audience often seems to divide into those who know about *Agricultural Involution* and nothing much else I have done, and those who know about my work overall, except for *Agricultural Involution*. As it has sold more copies by far than anything else I have written, I have grown rather fond—some might say too fond—of my orphan.

1. Geertz C. Culture and social change: the Indonesian case. *Man* 19:511-32, 1983. (Cited 15 times.)
2. Alexander J & Alexander P. Shared poverty as ideology: agrarian relations in colonial Java. *Man* 17:597-619, 1982. (Cited 5 times.)
3. Elson R E. *The cultivation system and "agricultural involution."* Working Paper No. 14, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Melbourne, Australia: Monash University, 1978.
4. Kahn J S. Towards a history of the critique of economism: the nineteenth-century German origins of the ethnographer's dilemma. *Man* 25:230-49, 1990.
5. Goldenweiser A. Loose ends of a theory on the individual pattern and involution in primitive society. (Lowie R, ed.) *Essays in anthropology presented to A.L. Kroeber*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1936. p. 99-104.

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