

Q2. In their article on the formation of “political forests” by Dutch and British colonial regimes in Southeast Asia, Vandergeest and Peluso (2001, 766) suggest that “we need to ‘de-forest’ our minds to recognize the contours of what political forests...have caused history to forget.” (a) Using an example of “colonial forest practices” (pp. 764-765) in ONE colonial territory described in the article, what do they mean by de-foresting our minds? (b) Could their argument be applied to other “resource” systems that we think of as “natural”?

Vandergeest and Peluso (2001) call on us to recognise forests as political-ecological spaces shaped by a history of colonialism and state territorialisation, as well as ongoing forest management practices. In parts of Southeast Asia, colonial forest authorities widened state territorialisation by creating and reifying ‘Customary Rights’, often based on ethnicity (791). In the Federal Malay States (FMS), one such strategy was the British administration’s demarcation of Orang Asli reserves.

‘De-foresting’ our minds requires us to consider the political motivations and power dynamics underlying the aboriginal reserves. The Orang Asli are widely regarded as among peninsular Malaysia’s original inhabitants. British colonial attitudes towards them were mixed: some officials viewed them as ‘uncivilised’ and ‘savages’, others saw them as ‘incapable of taking care of themselves’ and in need of ‘special protection’ (Subramaniam and Endicott 2020, 93). These perceptions underpinned the 1939 ‘Aboriginal Tribe Enactment’.

In practice, however, I argue that the reserves were ultimately yet another tool for colonial disciplining and consolidating control. In the same way that residual customary practices *not* included in legislation as Customary Rights became ‘crimes’ (Vandergeest and Peluso 2001, 792), once certain Orang Asli inhabited areas were officially demarcated as

reserves, their remaining land became off-limits. These lands were treated as state property for conservation or to be leased to other entities such as commercial enterprises. The Orang Asli's fruit holdings were also sometimes declared as 'state property' (Subramaniam and Endicott 2020, 99). Such acts of displacement are not only physical; the loss of ancestral land and resources is an insidious form of violence that erodes both personal and cultural identity. Yet, the demarcation of reserves also portrays colonial powers as 'generous', by 'making exemptions for' the 'inferior' locals. In reality, the Aboriginal Tribe Enactment effectively obscured the Orang Asli's real demands: they were granted access to certain forests but never regained sovereignty of their ancestral land. Their struggle continues till today, reflected in the Temiar tribe's 2019 standoff against state-backed loggers in Air Cepam Forest Reserve in Perak, Malaysia.

Vandergeest and Peluso's concept of 'de-forestation' may be applied to Vietnam's Mekong Delta. The delta is often cited as amongst the most vulnerable regions to climate change, in part due to its lowland topography and hence worsening saltwater intrusion. However, to focus only on the delta's 'natural' vulnerability to climate obscures—and even perpetuates—the power dynamics that have unfairly marginalised certain communities in the delta. I suggest that they are vulnerable more so due to structural violence stemming from top-down agricultural policies.

Since the 1990s, the Vietnamese central government has pursued a rice-first policy in large part for exports, facilitating large-scale production through the construction of irrigation dams, establishment of permanent freshwater zones, and offering subsidies for rice farmers (Thong et al. 2022). In the process, however, farmers living downstream of dams as well as aquaculture farmers who require brackish water are sidelined; many struggle with poverty.

Vietnam's export-oriented approach to rice production is also shaped by multiple legacies of imperialism. As Nevins and Peluso (2001) write, 'nothing is intrinsically a commodity.' (14)

According to Miller (2014), it was during the French colonial period that livelihoods in the delta first shifted ‘towards production for local and international markets rather than subsistence production alone’ (313). American introduction of high-technology agricultural equipment in the 1960s further led to the decline of traditional farming systems. Therefore, to ‘de-forest’ our minds is to recognise the delta as the intersection of colonial history, environmental impacts, economic interests and social struggles. The Mekong Delta is so vulnerable to climate change *because of* state policies which continue to unevenly shape its residents’ lives.

Q3. Vandergeest and Roth (2016) note that an important impact of political ecology research in Southeast Asian environmental studies has been the examination of environmental “narratives” or “myths”. (a) Briefly define what Vandergeest and Roth mean by environmental narrative or myth and what the impacts of these ideas might have on people and landscapes in Southeast Asia. (b) Discuss an example of an environmental narrative or myth in any of the articles/chapters we have read thus far in class. Who promoted or promotes this myth, and who does it benefit?

By environmental narratives or myths, Vandergeest and Roth (2016) refer to sweeping generalisations of rural people and their relationship with forests across Southeast Asia. Rural people, particularly upland farmers, are often simplistically labelled as ‘forest destroyer’ or ‘forest guardian’. (91) Blaming rural people for deforestation has led to discriminatory legislation displacing them from ancestral land—both spatially and culturally. Conversely, narratives that stress rural people’s capacity to manage forests sustainably may confine them to a specific space and/or livelihood, such as a state forest reserve and ecotourism respectively.

One deeply entrenched narrative across Southeast Asia is that swidden agriculture is ‘wasteful’ and ecologically ‘destructive’ (Thuy et al. 2020), resulting in anti-swidden policies in favour of permanent, sedentary agriculture instead. In Java, this notion dates back to the colonial era; the long-term, subsistence-oriented and area-extensive nature of swidden agriculture ran

contradictory to the colonial state's goals of short-term revenue gains and expanding export-oriented commoditization. Through top-down land laws like the 1870 Domain Declaration, the Dutch re-allocated significant proportions of the locals' land to European plantation enterprises (Fox et al. 2009). The post-independence Indonesian state, having inherited an economy heavily dependent on industrial agriculture, used the same narrative to justify further control of rural lands for commercial ventures. The state still classifies many swiddeners as ethnic minorities, contributing to continued discriminatory discourse and laws against their cultivation practices.

The narratives of today can also be traced back to Western-led conservation movements after the 1980s (Fox et al. 2009, 309), which portrayed nature as territory to be protected *from* humans. Such advocacy, however, embodied an imperialist mentality: the notion that 'experts' from the Global North 'knew better' than local people in Southeast Asia who had lived in reciprocity with their land over generations. In my view, this concretised a legacy of epistemological environmental injustice which continues into the 21st century, whereby scientific management is often legitimised over Indigenous knowledge and Western environmental activists tend to be awarded more visibility than their Global South counterparts (Jones 2020). Moreover, placing the blame of deforestation on rural farmers only diverts attention away from even larger drivers of deforestation such as large-scale palm oil plantations and logging; agricultural corporations therefore benefit from negative swidden narratives.

I am intentional in using the word 'narrative' (which may be true or false) rather than 'myth' (by definition false) to describe the perceptions of swidden, since through a profit-driven capitalist lens, fallows are indeed 'waste'. They are not perennially productive, and instead represent 'what could be': commercial plantations and valuable timber stands. When seen in the totality of its life cycle, however, swidden is much more than just a source of revenue; it is rich

both as an agroecosystem and biocultural system, and represents a way of life that had sustained populations across Southeast Asia for thousands of years prior to the 19th century colonial era.

Moreover, swidden agriculture is not inherently ecologically ‘destructive’. On the contrary, research has shown it can be effective in carbon sequestration (Thuy et al. 2020) and enriching biodiversity (Padoch and Vasquez 2010). In the colonial era, ecological concerns were often a smokescreen for colonial state-building. Over time, however, as upland farmers lose land to state territorialisation, they have been forced to shorten the fallow length, resulting in land degradation. Swidden today must therefore be viewed in the context of broader trends including increasing population density, export-oriented agricultural markets, and forest conservation policies. Ultimately, it is powerful state and private actors which benefit from the negative environmental narratives surrounding swidden agriculture, be it through land gains, economic capital or heightened power—albeit at the expense of swidden communities and their culture.

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