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S W I D D E N C U L T I V A T I O N I N E U R O P E

A SUBJECT MATTER FOR TROPICAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS

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Anthropologists working in tropical countries often look rather surprised when told that swidden cultivation in Europe was still practised as lately as 25 to 30 years ago. Indeed, the last swiddens were made in western Germany (Siegerland) in the early fifties of this century, and in one district of Austria (Breitenau, Styria), photographs could be still taken in swiddens in the early sixties (Fickeler 1954; Reichmann 1966: 338; Frühwald 1966: 162). It is also quite likely that the last swiddens of northern Russia were made in the same period, that is in the 10-15 years following World War II. Granted, the surfaces involved at the time were tiny, which goes some way toward explaining why they were so easily overlooked. But as a matter of fact, the terminal phase in the history of European swidden agriculture did not set forth so much earlier. By and large, the system still held its own in the 1870s, and its decline is likely to be linked with the massive importations of cereals from overseas, which worked so much havoc on many branches of European agriculture in the 1880s and 1890s. So the question remains of the causes of the anthropologists' lack of interest towards European swidden cultivation. But there is a second question, more relevant from our point of view here: what has anthropology missed by ignoring the European case — and what can be done about it? It is the aim of this paper to suggest tentative answers to these questions.

The first question needs not to retain us very long: the answers to it are too general and too many to be discussed here. Suffice it to say that the gap between European and Third-World anthropology remains as open as ever. Increasing specialization, a development as necessary in anthropology as it is in all sciences, has not been made up for by

a comparable improvement in the systems of communication. For example, the growing prevalence of English as the only working language in anthropology has evident advantages. But one of its drawbacks is that more and more anthropologists tend to rely more and more exclusively on English-written sources for relevant information, with the result that domains where most of the relevant information has not been published in English are more and more ignored. Swidden cultivation is definitely one of them, when it comes to Europe.

And now to our second question: how much has our understanding of swidden cultivation — and of swidden agriculturists — been impaired by neglect of the European case? Or to put it otherwise, what can we gain by including the latter in our overall picture? To give a complete answer to this question would suppose an intimate first-hand knowledge of both the European and the tropical systems, which is beyond my reach. Besides, if we have both excellent monographs (Conklin 1957; Bernot 1967) and compilations (Conklin 1961, 1963; Spencer 1966) on tropical swidden systems, we have nothing of comparable value for temperate countries. So, what follows should be regarded as schematic and provisional working hypotheses, at most.

In order to make this paper more easily readable, the material has been arranged under five headings: technology, ecology, economy, swidden agriculture as a system, and, last but not least, its future.

TECHNOLOGY

Slashing and burning. The European techniques do not seem outside of the range of variations observable in tropical countries. The two main differences are a more specialized tool-kit — bill-hooks of different shapes instead of the ubiquitous machete — and sometimes more elaborate methods of spreading out the wood on the ground for drying and burning.

Fences. They seem to have been less important in Europe, owing to the smaller density of wild animals, or to the tighter control of domestic ones.

Clearing the ground. In addition to slashing and burning proper, there is in many cases in Europe a further work of paring the ground with hoes, when the grass cover is important. The sods are left a few weeks to dry, put into heaps, burnt, and the ashes scattered. This process does not belong to "true" swidden systems, i.e. when the density of

trees and length of time between subsequent croppings are sufficient to prevent the formation of a turf. Paring and burning is very heavy work, however, even with the most adequate tools (the quality of the tools, and especially of the steel of the blades, can make a big difference). It is much more heavy than the cutting down of trees, which is why the preservation of an adequate tree cover is so important for the perpetuation of the system. Paring and burning seems unfrequent in tropical countries (Portères 1972); it seems quite unknown from tropical swiddens.

Sowing. Broadcast sowing, rather rare in tropical swiddens (as well as in tropical agricultures generally), is the rule in European swiddens. Even turnips, the only root-crop grown in European swiddens (and in some areas only: Finland and northern Russia) are sown broadcast, with special procedures for scattering the tiny seeds (Steensberg 1955).

Burying the seeds. With broadcast sowing, efficient and fast methods for burying the seeds are a prerequisite. It can be done by hand, with hoes or rakes. More often however, the seeds are buried with harrows or ards (ards = ploughs of symmetrical structure, with no coulter nor mouldboard) drawn by horses or oxen. Harrows and ards used in swiddens are very specialized implements, answering the very special conditions they have to work in (Steensberg 1955, Sigaut 1975). This very use of draught animals is one of the main differences between Europe and tropical countries, since in the latter, swidden agriculturists rarely own cattle and never use them for draught.

Weeding, scaring the birds, etc. In contrast with tropical countries, such tasks seem rather unimportant in European swiddens.

Harvest. Harvesting techniques in swiddens are more or less the same as in the neighbouring permanent systems, except that the use of the more efficient tools (scythes, and of course machines) is impossible. In Siegerland, the use of scythes was forbidden in order not to damage the offshoots from the cut-down trees.

Transport. Transportation problems occur at nearly every step of every agricultural production system. In swidden cultivation, where there is no fertilization, the main problem is carrying the harvest. There are no important differences on this point between Europe and tropical countries.

ECOLOGY

Basically, swidden agriculture is the agricultural use of a forest environment. All its main features are devised as an answer to forest conditions. Indeed, the two main categories of swidden systems can be defined according to the way the forest is used and preserved. They are:

- pioneer systems, where the forest is used without regard for its future preservation (people will move away, or settle down and shift to permanent agriculture), and
- stable systems, where the forest is allowed to recover, its recovery being sometimes more or less cared for.

Both systems are known from Europe, as well from tropical countries. But the second one only is of interest to us from an ecological point of view. It cannot be denied that in the long run, swidden agriculture tends to be destructive of the forest environment. So, stable systems cannot continue indefinitely if people are not strongly committed to the protection of their forests. The strength of this commitment, and the way it was enforced, are one of the most interesting features of some European swidden systems.

Localization of swidden agricultures. In Europe, stable systems were localized in areas characterized by acid soils, cold and wet climates, and mountainous terrain.

The link between soil acidity and the agricultural use of fire (in swiddens or otherwise) is especially strong, since most European cereals prefer neutral to slightly alkaline soils, and since fire remained the only means to correct excessive soil acidity until lime and alkaline fertilizers came into general use.

Effects of swiddening on spontaneous vegetation. They derive basically from, 1 the techniques of clearing the field, 2 the duration of the cropping period, 3 the degree of protection of the vegetation during its first years of regrowth, and 4 the duration of the period of recovery.

1. Fire does not only allow the cropping of cereals in excessively acid soils. It also promotes the growth of certain trees in the same way, i.e. by correcting soil acidity and destroying the layer of raw organic matter which develops under cold and wet conditions. Indeed, the use of fire developed into a forestry technique in Central Europe

in the last century for renewing decaying forests or for planting new ones in old moorlands (Sigaut 1975: 112 ss.). In the Ardennes, centuries of swiddening resulted in replacement of beeches and firs by the more useful oaks. Another cause of this replacement is that oaks shoot off more readily from their stocks or roots.

Fire seems also to have an effect on the germination and growth of an important group of plants in European swiddens, brooms and furze (Genista sp. and Ulex sp.). These plants were important for their produce - fodder, thatch, litter, firewood - as well as for their ecological rôle. They fix nitrogen in their roots, provide some shade and protection to the young trees, and above all, their quick and thick growth prevents soil erosion during the first years after cropping, before the tree cover has had time to reform. It is a question if a similar group of plants plays a similar rôle in tropical countries.

2 and 3. In Europe as elsewhere, the number of successive crops taken out of one swidden was small: two or three at most. In many instances, moreover, there were strong regulations forbidding the taking of more than one crop (generally rye). This was in order not to damage the first and most vigorous regrowth of the trees. In addition, the stumps had to be pared off in a way favouring the production of offshoots, and the use of scythes was forbidden to prevent their being cut down again. Harvesting had to be done with sickles. And after the harvest, cattle was kept out during a few years (4 to 6), until the new crop of trees was high and strong enough to bear the browsing.

4. The period of recovery was also submitted to strong regulations. Its length was 16 to 25 years, with an average of 20-21 years (Sigaut 1975: 122).

The crops. In contrast with tropical countries, the number of plants grown in European swiddens was small. They were exclusively cereals, with the only exception of turnips in Northeast Europe, and possibly, but quite unfrequently, of potatoes.

In Mediterranean and southern areas, wheat was the main and often only swidden crop. In the more northerly regions, rye replaced wheat. Buckwheat, being quick-growing, was sometimes sown in early summer a few months before rye, as a catch-crop. Beyond the northern limit of rye cultivation, in the extreme Northeast of Russia, the main crop was barley, and beyond its altitudinal limit, in western Germany, oats. Millet (Panicum miliaceum), probably most important in former times,

had already nearly disappeared by the last century, with the only exception of the mountains of eastern Slovakia (Podolák 1972).

Effects of swiddening on crops. In preindustrial contexts, these effects were mainly advantages, from an agronomic viewpoint. In addition to allowing the growth of crops where it would have been impossible otherwise, swiddening implied the following consequences:

- fertilization was not needed, since the ashes made for it; nevertheless, the yield was in general far greater than on permanent fields in similar conditions;
- weeds were no problem, at least when there was no overcropping; indeed, one area of West Germany specialized in the production of rye seeds on pared and burnt land, because the grain harvested was free of weed seeds;
- pests were perhaps less of a problem than in permanent fields, although nothing sure is known on this matter;
- the quality of the produce (grain and straw) was often superior in the swiddens; the same is probably true in tropical countries: it is often said, for example, that swidden rice is superior in taste to rice grown in permanent irrigated fields.

For the future, it would be important to go deeper in the analysis of such advantages, in order to see which ones would remain true -- and marketable -- in industrializing countries.

ECONOMY

There are a number of different "yields" to be taken into account for the study of agricultural systems, each one with its proper significance. In many societies, people think mainly in terms of seed yield (number of tons harvested for one sown); in others, they will think rather in terms of surface yields (tons per hectare). The number of such ratios is considerable. In order to actually understand the economics of traditional agricultures, it would be necessary to list all these possible different ratios, and to assess the significance of each of them. To my knowledge, this work has not been done yet. But one of the more important kinds of yields in every society is clearly the quantity produced per unit of working time -- although the yield per short unit of time (hour or day) may have a quite different relevance from the yield per month or year --.

The comparison of yields between swidden and permanent preindus-

trial agricultural systems often seems to be to the advantage of the first (Sigaut 1975: 150-155). What matters for the future, however, would be to assess the exact point where, in the process of industrialization, work in swiddens ceases to be competitive against rising salaries nearby. In the French Ardennes, this point was reached relatively late, around 1890. Until at least 1880, the work in swiddens paid more than in neighbouring industries, although the area was by then one of the more advanced in France in industrial development.

SWIDDEN CULTIVATION AS A SYSTEM

In contrast with tropical countries, swidden cultivation in Europe (in western Europe at least), was not a system by itself, but was tightly integrated in larger socio-economic systems. Culturally, swidden agriculturists did not differ from their neighbours in language, beliefs, customs, etc. To describe them as swidden agriculturists is even questionable, since in most cases, swidden cultivation was for them but one of several economic occupations, such as wood-cutting, charcoal-making, mining or metallurgy, wood-working, gathering, etc., not to forget of course some permanent agriculture. Indeed, it seems to have been the rule rather ~~the~~ exception in 19th century Europe that peasants practice one or more jobs in addition to agriculture — the concept itself of agriculture as a full-time employment seems quite recent, and what is surprising about it is that it could be developed at all, in spite of the seasonality of agricultural work. */ than*

So, a factor in the shaping of swidden cultivation systems was the way people allotted their time throughout the year among alternative occupations, swidden cultivation being only one of them. Although important, this factor cannot be treated here at any length, if only because it is so poorly known. A second factor was the market. Of course, grain was kept for subsistence. But beside grain, the swiddens yielded a number of forests products for sale: wood of course (not timber, but poles and firewood), charcoal, and above all barks. In Schwarzwald, Siegerland and Ardennes, tanbark from oaks was especially important for the nearby tanneries. Gathering could be locally important: in the Maures-and-Esterel region, in Southern France, roots of heather were dug for making pipes. It is possible that the gathering of mushrooms, of herbs (medicinal and others), the trapping of game

(especially of small birds, a very sought after delicacy in former times), etc., were of commercial significance here or there. In short, two kinds of products were obtained in swidden cultivation: products for subsistence (grain, straw, some of the wood, plus milk and meat from animals browsing in the woods), and products for sale (wood, charcoal, bark, some gathering products). It is more than probable that stable systems could not have survived for so long without both.

A third factor in the shaping of swidden systems is of course social organization. From its very nature, swidden agriculture demands a high degree of cooperation between members of the village community. Cooperation was indispensable for the enforcement of the regulations without which the system could not remain viable for long. Most often, the land under swidden cultivation was communal property, and remained so until the system itself ended (it often remains so to this day, for instance in Siegerland, where the land belongs to Hauberggenossenschaften, litt. "coppice-mount societies"). The mir of Slavic peoples, of so great interest to early Russian socialist writers, was certainly deeply linked with an economy based on swidden cultivation. Communal property was of course the most straightforward way in which a community could assert its control over the economy. In this case, such decisions as the choice of the piece of land to be cleared each year, its measurement and division in plots, and the allotment of a part of equal value to each member, were all taken by the community itself, or by a body of delegates. In Siegerland for instance, the apportionment of parts followed elaborate rules to assure its randomization (Kroll 1936). In many cases, peoples could sell their rights to the part allotted to them. On the other hand, when the land was privately owned, the landlord often auctioned the parts to be cleared, which could happen also when the land was owned by the state.

But the control of the community (or of the landlord, whoever he was) was not restricted to allotment of the land. As already mentioned several times, it was also effective in technical matters. In order to afford the highest degree of protection for the forest, there were regulations for the cutting down of trees, for the burning of wood and sod, for the burying of seeds, for the harvesting of grain, for the browsing of cattle, etc. It is a question whence these regulations came from. Were they devised by the people themselves, or were they imposed by some superior authority? Both are possible. What seems certain is that such rules could never have been enforced without an active cooperation

on the part of the people, which means that they could not have been quite incompatible with their economic interests. This is clearly in contrast with most tropical countries, where colonial and post-colonial administrations, insomuch as they did not simply ignore the problem, aimed much more at suppressing swidden cultivation than at managing it.

To summarize, looking at swidden cultivation as a system, the more interesting differences between Europe and tropical countries could be the following:

- a tighter integration in the surrounding socio-economic systems; far from destroying swidden agriculture, this integration probably helped it to adapt and survive much longer than could have been possible otherwise;
- owing to this long-term adaptation and integration to very differing social environments, a wider range of solutions in the fields of land ownership and community organization;
- in some areas at least, a very detailed body of technical regulations aiming at insuring the continuity, not only of the forest, but of the way it was used and therefore of the people who used it (which does not mean the absence of any conflict, of course);
- and, last but not least, a probable wealth of written sources allowing to follow up back all this through several centuries, at least in some regions (western Germany for instance); it is a question if this historical depth is to be reached anywhere else outside Europe, except in Japan (McEwan 1956) and possibly in a few neighbouring countries.

PROBLEMS FOR THE FUTURE

Insomuch as the concept of primitiveness still makes any sense at all, no anthropologist would still argue that swidden cultivation is primitive. On the face of it, however, the fact that swidden cultivation arose so much interest among anthropologists, and so little among agricultural scientists, clearly denotes how much the bias of its primitiveness remains strong in the modern mind*. This bias could well be the core of the problem for the future. It is self-evident that no resources will be wasted on research on a "primitive" system. And since no system

* In 1961, Conklin listed more than 1200 references on swidden cultivation in the anthropological literature. By contrast, the two main referred-to works in the agricultural literature are Greenland (1975) and Nye and Greenland (1960).

can cope for long without research in the changing conditions of the modern world, the condemnation of swidden agriculture as primitive amounts to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This is not to deny its dangers (arising from excessive demographic pressure), nor that it is eventually doomed to extinction (although nobody knows for sure what will happen in a few decades). But until the time of its natural extinction has come, i.e. until people freely prefer to give up swidden cultivation for more profitable alternatives (as happened in Europe), any attempt to suppress it will range between the futile and the odious. No doubt, a rapid growth of general productivity and income in the Third World would soon make swidden cultivation obsolete. As long as such a growth is not achieved, however, swidden cultivation will be there, and the real problem will be to find ways to manage it, not to destroy it.

By managing swidden cultivation, however, it is not suggested here that the administration or any body of civil servants should be the managers. Quite the contrary. The less they will interfere the better. Traditional controls tend to break down against rising pressures, both from outside and from inside. The first job of the administration should be to entrust village communities with the necessary means to keep or regain an ability to effectually manage their production system in new ways. This is of course a political and legal problem, which I am in no position to discuss responsibly. All that I can say is that, in my opinion, solving this problem is a prerequisite, without which nothing else will do.

The second job of the administration is technical and economical. Against the rising pressures already mentioned, productivity must be raised without further endangering the environment. How large the margin for increased productivity in swidden agriculture? In the quasi-absence of relevant research, no one can tell for sure. What is sure is that to be relevant, such research must be built up on the knowledge and skills of the people themselves -- as indeed it largely was in the more developed countries. To achieve this, the biggest difficulty is probably that research has today developed a language and culture of its own, too remote from the language and culture of subsistence peasants to allow for easy mutual understanding. Here perhaps lies an important task for anthropologists.

Far from being adverse to the environment, besides, increasing productivity may be a prerequisite for its conservation. Low product-

ivity means making little out of extant resources, so that in the face of increasing population pressure, it can only lead to increased deterioration of the environment. This point needs no further elaboration.

We are in no position here to go further into the specifics of agricultural research problems. The only hint we would like to add is, that the margin for increasing productivity in tropical swidden cultivation systems is probably far broader than it ever was in Europe. The range of possible crops is much larger (in Europe, it was restricted to cereals), and the climate allows a more rapid vegetation recovery after cropping. Granted, there is a limiting factor in the correspondingly more rapid depletion of mineral resources in the soil; a limitation all the more severe as artificial fertilization is not usually considered feasible in swidden agriculture. Indeed, fertilization feasibility first depends on transportation facilities (like so many other things that it is difficult not to see transportation improvement as a top priority in any development programme). But in swiddens proper, there would be no point in adding fertilizers to the already abundant ashes. However, if we look at swidden systems as basically a rotation between two crops, one of food or industrial plants, and the other of shrubs or trees, the idea of fertilizing the latter may not seem quite absurd. Indeed, such an idea was actually put into effect by European peasants some decades ago, although in a somewhat different context. In some areas of southwestern France, there are specific pieces of land devoted to the production of furze for manure, called touyas (from tuye, a local name of furze). When commercial fertilizers first arrived into this region, the peasants used them, not on their crops directly, but on their touyas.

It is not suggested that such ideas are to be taken at their face value. What is suggested is that the lore of peasantries' knowledge and skills is an indispensable basis for any relevant research aiming at increasing the productivity of their production systems.

CONCLUSION

Anthropology is a study in differences. Differences between human societies are what makes them amenable to rational analysis. It is somewhat of an illusion to believe that any one society could be scientifically studied by itself, as an isolated object. The most "objective" monograph is still to some degree, implicitly at least, a study in differences — the differences between the observed society and the observer's society. History of anthropology makes it overwhelmingly

clear that it took the immense differences between the so-called "exotic" societies and the European ones, for an anthropological thought to be developed in European minds.

And so it was that anthropology was for a long time considered as the study of "exotic" peoples. This stage was necessary, there is no point for us Europeans to be ashamed of it. What is needed is to go further. The first step off, i.e. the coming out of anthropologists in significant numbers from among the "exotic" peoples themselves, is well under way. It was long overdue. From the very nature of anthropology, any enduring monopoly of some particular culture over anthropological thought cannot but lead into a deadend.

The first concern of the new Third World anthropologists was to do fieldwork in their own countries, in order to break the European monopoly there. This was of course the proper thing to do. What we would like to suggest here is that a second step may now be in order: that of Third World anthropologists coming to do fieldwork in Europe. In our opinion, this would be a way to open up really new perspectives in European anthropology.

Swidden cultivation would be an excellent subject matter for Third World anthropologists intending to do fieldwork in Europe. Its late disappearance makes it still possible to find aged peoples who have a first-hand knowledge of it. The wealth of archives in some areas will help to give its study an historical perspective which is often lacking in tropical countries. As already said, there is no overall detailed study of swidden cultivation systems in Europe. The collaboration of Third World anthropologists to such a study would certainly help to bring forth new questions and new answers, useful for a better understanding of both European and tropical swidden cultivation systems.

Paris, le 9 octobre 1978

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In addition to works specifically referred to in the text, the following have been instrumental in the writing of this paper: Aurora et al. (1976-1977), Boulbet (1966), Dreyfus-Gamelon (forthcoming) and Wilken (1977). We are wholly responsible, however, for the opinions expressed in this paper, as well as for errors and omissions. Any European material put forth without specific references is taken from Sigaut (1975).

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RESUME

On oublie trop que l'agriculture forestière, l'essartage, n'a cessé d'exister en Europe que dans les années 1950 ou 1960. Or, contrairement aux systèmes tropicaux d'essartage, qui ont donné lieu à des milliers de publications, les systèmes européens restent mal connus.

Notre ignorance à leur sujet est d'autant plus dommageable qu'ils se distinguent des systèmes d'essartage tropicaux par de nombreuses particularités: emploi d'animaux de trait et d'instruments attelés, intégration souvent étroite dans les systèmes économiques environnants, structures socio-juridiques originales sur le plan foncier et sur celui de l'organisation du travail, etc.

Une étude plus poussée des systèmes européens d'essartage permettrait certainement d'élargir nos perspectives et d'améliorer notre compréhension de l'agriculture forestière en général. Dans les pays du Tiers-Monde, où celle-ci restera encore pratiquée un certain temps, cela permettrait de mieux comprendre la dynamique potentielle des systèmes actuels, et de mieux tirer parti de la marge d'adaptation qu'ils peuvent encore posséder aux pressions croissantes du monde extérieur.

Il serait très souhaitable qu'une étude d'ensemble des systèmes européens d'essartage puisse être entreprise avec la participation active d'anthropologues originaires de pays du Tiers-Monde. L'apparition d'anthropologues dans ces pays a été un progrès nécessaire pour l'anthropologie, car le pluralisme culturel est indispensable à son développement. Il faut poursuivre dans cette voie en invitant les anthropologues du Tiers-Monde à venir travailler sur des terrains européens. Peut-être mettra-t-on ainsi fin aux limitations qui résultent d'une situation dans laquelle la quasi-totalité des anthropologues étaient européens, et la plupart de leurs terrains appartenaient au Tiers-Monde.