

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JHM-8

GUNUNG KEMALA

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

P.O. Box 206
Samarinda, East Kalimantan
Indonesia
December 12, 1987

Dear Peter and Friends,

I met Kumala Burmarahim on a recent trip to Lampung, the southernmost province in Sumatra. Better known as Cik Ala, she is a woman of unique energy and mischievous humor, and the dedicated Village Head of Gunung Kemala. Her hospitality and the opinions of her family and friends were the windows through which I saw life in the Krui hinterland. Though their views may not show the whole picture, they explained much about how things are done in a land where environmental degradation will hopefully never reach a crisis point.

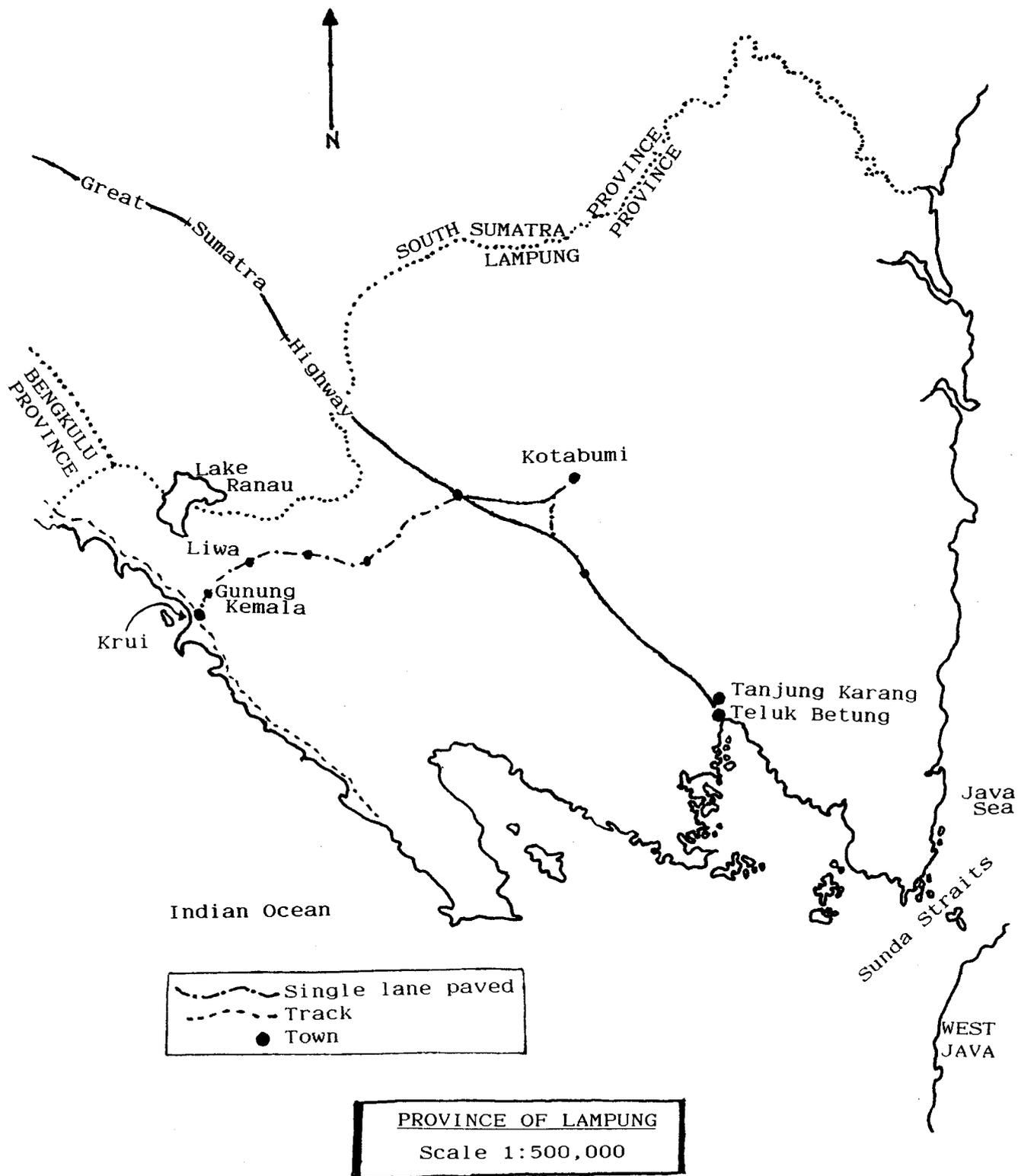
.....

The mosque loudspeakers have just fallen silent following the evening Isya prayers. I listen, transfixed, to rhythmic pounding in the courtyard surrounding the well at the back of the house. The muffled cracks of a grooved stick hitting a rulang log are eerily in sync with my heartbeat. A quick break, punctuated by hearty bursts of women's laughter, another joke, whooping calls of assent from the small crowd gathered in the courtyard, and kids giggling....Then the resonant striking of stick against bark resumes, gradually loosening the course, fiber-lined skin from the log it covers.

This cadence has not been heard here in decades, the sound of making a bark cloth. To the older people watching, the rhythm brings back hours of stories and jokes almost forgotten over the past 40 years. Cik Ala and the other women in their fifties and sixties (though it is hard to guess ages) are the stars tonight, not quite nostalgic about the rulang cloth, arguing about whether it's better to scrape off the woody outer bark before or after separating it from the log. Working, Cik Ala comes up with pantun, the improvised Malay-style verse songs still popular here. But there are also serious moments, painful silences respected.

The older pounders give some kids a turn, kibbitzing on how to stretch and separate the fibers without splitting the cloth along its grain. One little girl calls out that she'd rather go naked than wear a scratchy bark cloth, which the older women find hilarious. Apparently, they'd felt that way, too, but now they keep silent on how the issue was resolved in their youth. The bark cloth-making is a hit in Gunung Kemala this evening, with a bigger audience than the alternative entertainment, The Cosby Show.

Judith Mayer is an Institute Fellow studying environmental protection, conservation, and sustainable development issues in Southeast Asia.



Bark cloth was standard attire here during the Japanese occupation, from 1942 to 1945, and the subsequent five years of the Indonesian war against Dutch colonialism. During these hard times, Gunung Kemala's people revived many of the basic survival skills that might otherwise have died with the old people who knew the forest but perished of over-work or malnutrition during the wars.

While the Japanese forced adults to work in exhausting farming and building projects, children like Cik Ala played hookey from mandatory schooling by spending as much time as they could in the forests above the village or in the extensive kebun. (There is no adequate English word to describe a Krui kebun -- it is a mixed garden and ~~forest~~.) With their lucrative mata-kucing resin trees, fruits, spices, and coffee the kebun had long been the backbone of Gunung Kemala's cash economy; during the wars, it was the kebun's food that supported bare subsistence. The fruit, roots, shoots, leaves, fungi, small game and fish that Cik Ala could bring home from the kebun or forest were essential additions to the scant rations left over after the Japanese took their share of Gunung Kemala's crops.

In more peaceful times, Gunung Kemala's residents rehabilitated their war-damaged gardens in an effort to replace the large number of trees that had been cut for buildings or even firewood, under duress. (Such deliberate cutting of still-productive trees is unheard-of in normal times.) Many of the girls who had taken care of the kebun when there was no one else to do it returned to work closer to the house, or in the irrigated rice fields in the valleys of Gunung Kemala's two rivers. Others were accustomed to the shade and freedom of the forests and work in the upland dry fields (ladang), continuing to work alongside the men. Cik Ala was one of these.

.....

In the 1950s, world markets picked up for Lampung's cash crops and Krui's traditional forest products. Krui had a long history of exporting resins and rattan cane for long-distance markets. Krui's location made it a strategic trading point, one of the last major stops for shipping moving south, toward Java, along Sumatra's west coast. In the 1950s, Krui farmers experimented, adding more of the lucrative cash crops to their kebun, but the kind of intensive monocropping for coffee, hardwoods, and spices so common on so much of the hilly land in Indonesia never caught on very well in Krui.

The colonial plantation systems had never penetrated into the Krui hills, and Gunung Kemala was spared both the debilitating consequences of enforced production and the upheaval that hit the plantation-dominated regions of Sumatra when Dutch enterprises were nationalized in 1957 and 1958. Although Krui had paid tribute to the dominant trading powers on Sumatra's west coast since at least Majapahit times (the 14th century), the region's farmers never lost direct control of their scattered ladang (unirrigated fields) and kebun. However, the economic hardship of the destruction of kebun resources during World War II continued to be felt until trees planted in the late 1940s and 1950s matured. Around then, in the mid-1960s, political troubles again hit the border of the jungle; army and police hunted down suspected Communists in the hills.

Through my stay in Krui, I had to remind myself that a generation or two ago the area's population was just a fraction of what it is today. About 4000 people now live in the town of Pasar Krui, on the coast, and villages like Gunung Kemala have over 200 houses. But the mixture of field and forest production in the Krui region, even two generations ago, was flexible enough to adapt to the rapid population growth. Farmers have intensified padi cultivation in the river-valley sawah (irrigated fields), now producing two crops a year, although this is almost completely dependent on the chemical- and cash-hungry new rice varieties introduced over the past few years.

Based on Gunung Kemala farmers' answers to admittedly haphazard questioning, it also seems that the area's pattern of ladang and kebun is a far cry from previous patterns of "shifting cultivation." Old ladang close to the village are now converted to kebun when their fertility declines and the proportion of weeds to desired vegetation increases rapidly after several years of repeated planting. (As in most other formerly forested areas of Southeast Asia, the telltale sign of an exhausted ladang is the encroachment of the sharp alang-alang grass, Imperata cylindrica, a universal pest.)

The transformation of the forest lands around Gunung Kemala has occurred gradually, as people have cleared, burned off, and planted small fields in the forest, worked these ladang for several years (up to 10 or more), and planted trees on the land for a huge variety of uses, rather than simply allowing natural secondary forest to reclaim the fallow fields. These means of converting the forest for human use maintain many of the ecological values of the original jungle. The ladang-and-kebun succession preserves natural watershed and catchment areas, and the layered, multi-level structure of the kebun, with its great diversity of plant life, mimics many characteristics of the rainforest habitat. Gunung Kemala's pattern of land conversion is a process of long-term nurturing, the approach of the gardener rather than of the chainsaw and bulldozer.

A visitor to Krui from, say, the United States (no -- Mars is too far) casually glancing at one of these kebun from a distance might mistake the area for a naturally regenerating secondary forest, with its gradually increasing variety of plant life. Indeed, if a Krui kebun is neglected for a few years, that's exactly what it will become. But the dead give-away to quickly distinguish a Krui kebun from other secondary forests is the large number of mata-kucing resin trees planted in the kebun. The trees bear the cup-like gashes of resin-scraping holes, one above the other, climbing up the tree trunks like ladders. Resin farmers begin to tap the trees ten or twelve years after planting, returning every few days or every couple of weeks to scrape whatever sparkling, hardening goop has dripped into the holes in the interim. The holes grow wider and wider with years of such scraping. Mata-kucing resin is used in high-quality varnishes and paints, and sold to traders in Gunung Kemala or in Pasar Krui.

Younger, sunny kebun tend to be planted with a great number of banana trees, which thrive on the abundant light. Graceful sugar palms (aren) bear clumps of fruit in various stages of ripeness, two or three clumps hanging from each tree trunk on stems as long as I am tall. Young fruit look like over-size red, orange, or green vitamin capsules, and are cooked as vegetables. But the aren tree is mainly grown to satisfy the sweet tooth; its rich, brown sugar is essential to much of Indonesia's spicy cooking.

The Krui people cultivate stands of bamboo in their gardens. Each of the four varieties planted around Gunung Kemala has its special uses, from the slivers fastening pandanus leaf food packages to the stilts supporting the field shelters, or pondok. Young bamboo shoots are eaten along with any number of stems, leaves, and buds growing around the bases of the kebun trees or in the jungle. And then there are the durian trees, the emergent favorites of this simulated rainforest.

Many forms of jungle wildlife cannot survive in the kebun, without the intricate symbiotic relationships and niches of the rainforest in which they evolved or to which they have adapted. But other creatures may prosper, attracted by the fruit or the greater amounts of sunlight. The kebun appear to be short on avian life (a hint that perhaps they are also short on the insects that Sumatran jungle birds are adapted to eat), but macaques and even leaf monkeys of several types feast in the crowns of the fruit trees. Squirrels and mice do fine, and mouse-deer, rusa, and wild pigs wander in from the wilder forests. Krui's kebun-makers fight a generally losing battle against several kinds of snakes, which hang around the branches and coil in the bases of the "new" trees. An occasional flying bunglon lizard (Draco volans) appears on a tree trunk and disappears in the blink of an eye.

.....

Cik Ala began to assume responsibilities as de facto head of her family while still a teenager. Her father disappeared with a new wife and her two brothers left the village to study in the new, post-revolutionary Indonesia. (One brother returned from studying law in Moscow to become a Jakarta bureaucrat; the other became chief of police intelligence for the North Lampung kabupaten, where he was in charge of capturing and interrogating suspected Communists.)

Cik Ala was determined that the absence of men in her household, other than her sisters' new husbands, would not hamper her own success. Her father's absence was an embarrassment, but her mother was not as concerned with the family's "status" as Cik Ala. She demanded only a simple life, and now lives in a small wooden house backed by sawah at the end of the village's sprawl along the area's one paved road. For several years, Cik Ala made decisions regarding the family's land in her brothers' names, but eventually gave up that pretense when it became apparent that they were not going to return to live in the village.

Cik Ala found herself controlling a legacy of inherited sawah, overlooked by the graves of her aristocratic forebears. Unlike her sisters, she preferred to spend her energy in the kebun or ladang with occasional trips into the "real" jungle, rather than in the family's irrigated fields. (Much of this jungle, mature old forest in the hills some distance from the village, was on its way to being "protected" (lindung) from clearing or logging under Indonesia's developing land and forest laws.)

Sawah plots that her sisters were not working Cik Ala allocated to more distant relatives and sawahless neighbors. She didn't do badly under these arrangements, which were dictated by adat (customary law). From more distant relatives and neighbors, Cik Ala got one-third of each harvest as rent. Considering herself a generous and charitable person, and certainly not an exploitive

landlord, in hard times Cik Ala reduced or "delayed" these payments, making quite a number of Gunung Kemala people gratefully beholden to her. I never found out exactly how much irrigated land the family controls under one arrangement or another, but it amounts to a good portion of the best land, closest to the village. There is enough for any of Cik Ala's relatives who don't have their own sawah to cultivate a small field. I wasn't in Gunung Kemala long enough to figure out what proportion of people there have access to sawah, but found that many households depend only on dry fields, ladang, for their rice. Some people even prefer to open new ladang, even if far away from the village, when their needs grow rather than ask help from owners of irrigated land.

The possibility of "opening" new land for a ladang, expanding a kebun, or in exceptional circumstances even burning off an old kebun to grow staple crops provides Gunung Kemala with a "safety valve." As long as these alternatives for getting more land exist, they will probably prevent disastrous over-cultivation of lands already cleared, and mitigate the potential for the growth of a substantial class of landless farmers anytime in the near future. However, this security may come at the expense of Krui's still-extensive old forests.

And always, the demand for cash increases: cash for better building materials, cash for motorcycles, cash for fertilizers and pesticides, cash for newly-available commercial medicines, cash for school fees, cash for cigarettes. In Gunung Kemala, cash comes from selling kebun produce, from raising chickens or goats, from relatives who have left, or from gathering rattan or resin chunks in the old jungle. (Along the coast, it may also come from fishing, but not in Gunung Kemala.) Everyone I spoke with about the matter in the village seemed to agree that the lands used as kebun and ladang are pushing ever farther into the old jungle, including primary forests. More and more frequently, they are running up against lands claimed by other communities. The legally protected forest is being encroached upon in some areas. Yet, these same people also told me that there's still a lot of land available in the region. A few even mentioned that they wished the Transmigration program would come into the area, since it might lead to better roads, markets, and government services. (The Transmigration program, of government-sponsored new villages inhabited by migrants from the most densely-populated areas of Indonesia or areas subject to natural disasters, got its start in other parts of Lampung under the Dutch. There are no transmigration sites in Krui, perhaps because of the hilly terrain, but also because the traditional land tenure system under Krui adat gives such clear recognition of permanent use rights for Krui's type of kebun and ladang. There are few, if any, potential sites in the Krui region for completely new settlements.)

In Gunung Kemala, I wondered how to judge whether an area is "poor." Certainly, there is plenty of food in Gunung Kemala, though nothing fancy, and not much except coconuts obtained without quite a bit of work or a long walk. Houses appear sturdy, and except for the middle of the dry season, there is plenty of water in the wells of the village (though not everyone has access to a well) and the two rivers that run through it. But Gunung Kemala's nearby kebun and "empty lands" no longer supply enough firewood for the increasing population that depends on wood for cooking. Similar signs of population stress are familiar throughout the forest-dependent Third World. Many teenage girls walk

three hours from the village, several times weekly, to gather enough fuel for their families' cooking needs. Once girls are big enough to carry a full load, the time-consuming search for firewood may cost them the opportunity to continue in school. This problem was exacerbated a few years ago when the government lifted its heavy subsidy of kerosene prices. Kerosene is still under 300 rupiah per liter (about US 18¢), the price of a kilogram of low-quality rice or a pack of cigarettes. Many people in Gunung Kemala still find it too expensive. Others just get lucky with wood from their kebun; occasionally, an old mata-kucing tree falls down, and the owners console themselves for the loss of a productive asset by enjoying the fragrant firewood it provides for several months.

.....

The mosque loudspeaker has just fallen silent following the mid-morning prayers. Cik Ala looks tired and annoyed as the kabupaten tax collector reminds her that Gunung Kemala is the only village in the region he covers that has failed to pay this year's taxes in full. The Village Head is not actually responsible for collecting the regional and development taxes, but the threat is there: if the taxes don't come in, allocations for development projects in the delinquent area will be indefinitely held up in "administration." Cik Ala sighs as he pulls away, riding pinion on the back of another state employee's motor scooter. Then she chuckles, and starts to tell me how she left into business over twenty years ago, almost by accident.

In the mid-1960s, the road over the mountains to Kotabumi was not yet paved, making Krui virtually inaccessible except by sea. As small sailing-prahu trade buckled under pressure from the more politically powerful steamship companies (ironically, with freight rates higher than those charged by the smaller traders), a few merchants with established commercial links in the outside world gained a stranglehold on trade of Krui's produce. Fed up with getting prices for her resin that she knew were too low, Cik Ala decided to try trading in resin herself. It required more than the production of her family's own kebun to make the expensive voyage to Jakarta worthwhile. So Cik Ala sold her gold jewellery and used the proceeds to buy up resin from her neighbors, taking the chance that she would make enough of a profit at least to pay for the trip.

As it happened, she'd hit the market at a good time and found a buyer in Jakarta willing to give her a price much higher than she'd expected --- and to take another load in several months! Cik Ala continued in this trade for seven years, until even the few ships that still called at Krui stopped coming regularly, when the road to Kotabumi was paved, around 1970. Now virtually all of the trade out of Krui moves through Kotabumi to Teluk Betung, a rough twenty-hour trip. And much of that must still go through Jakarta before it is exported! The traders in resins and rattan own their own trucks and have long-standing relationships with the exporters from Teluk Betung.

Cik Ala used the resin profits to build a brick-walled, glass-windowed, tile-floored edifice on the site of the traditional old wooden house. Increasingly, in addition to having a finger in many goings-on within the village, she became its major link with the outside. In this "man's work," she discarded women's clothes (quite a shock, in the era before unisex) and happily took on male prerogatives, including the option not to marry.

Gradually, Cik Ala came to^{be} recognized as a leader in Gunung Kemala, a fair and astute business woman, and an encouraging friend. She did not hesitate to express strong opinions about anything that interested her, and was rarely at a loss for a proverb, a joke, or a song. Due to the androgynous personality she cultivated, she was able to bend the ear of both women and men. She carried out the family's aristocratic adat responsibilities, which mainly consisted of dealing with land issues, holding ceremonies, and sponsoring feasts, in her brothers' names. However, when a new raja (local adat chief) had to be chosen in the mid-1970s, no man in the village had the combination of lineage, financial resources, and knowledge of customary law and history that Cik Ala did. She was named raja by consensus of the senior men in the village, despite the opposition of skeptics who found a woman raja inconceivable. (Now, with no sultan to top the feudal aristocracy, there is no one outside the village to rule on whether such an adat decision is acceptable.)

As raja, Cik Ala gained a reputation. In 1977, she was the logical choice for Village Head (Kepala Desa), a post elected by all village residents over seventeen years old, and the link between the "people" (masyarakat) and the regional government in Indonesia's rigidly top-down administrative system. While she was the first woman ever chosen as a Village Head in Lampung, there are now four, including the head of the village adjacent to Gunung Kemala.

.....

Gunung Kemala's isolation is both a blessing and a curse. While the hills around it have protected the area from in-migration, a dominant feature of much of the rest of the province of Lampung, Krui has also missed out on the convenience of improved "infrastructure" paid for by the government. Roads crumble, bridges disintegrate through lack of maintenance, and old port facilities slowly sink into the sea. But compared to much of the rest of the province, though pressure on land is gradually increasing, the area is remarkably stable.

After a week in Krui, the bus ride back to Tanjung Karang was a shock. Once the dramatic climb up the occasionally-disappearing road to the ridge that separates Krui from the rest of Lampung was behind us, we were in a different world altogether. A bit like leaving Oz for Kansas. Past the ridge, the forest was gone. Not just the jungle, but virtually any sizable clump of trees that might have grown there a few years ago. While many of the areas for the next seventy kilometers or so had been cleared at one time or another in Lampung's history, it was the construction of the road we were on that had dealt the forests and the upper watersheds the final blow. Much of the ground from the road to the horizon was naked, or dotted with new coffee and clove tree saplings. I tried to estimate how long the land could stand up to the gullies seemed to be taking over. Five years? Six? The buildings of the settlements clinging to the sides of the road were mostly still raw, unweathered wood, sloppily thrown up in no recognizable tradition except "quick." I was stunned to learn that the ethnic Sundanese (from West Java) and Batak (from North Sumatra) began "opening" the land only two or three years ago. The soil's rapid disappearance was the result of rain and sun.

I was relieved to see bean plants crowding around the bases of the young coffee and clove plants a couple of hours further east. So it was not to be "hit-and-run" agriculture after all. However, it had clearly taken the new settlers a while to realize the risks of indiscriminate land opening. As we approached Kotabumi, huge gullies alternated with brand new Javanese-style terraced sawah climbing the valley walls, met by broad, government-built irrigation canals. As the sun set behind the bus, I reflected on the progression of land from Krui to Kotabumi. It represents Indonesians' best hopes and worst nightmares with regard to moving on to new land.

Sincerely yours,

Judith Thayer

Received in Hanover 2/8/88

* The underlined terms used here are mostly Indonesian, rather than those used in the Krui language.

I was accompanied on this trip by Rosemary Gianno.