

Culture in Regime Shifts: An Exploration of Forest-dependent Communities in Transition

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Conventional notions of natural resource dependency often focus on the economic or ecological viability of the natural resource as the driver of a community. When the key driver collapses (for any reason) the community crosses a critical social threshold, forcing its social system into the process of a regime shift. Analogizing Margaret Archer's theory of cultural morphogenesis to resilience theory's understanding of social system behaviour, this paper examines the complex 'back-loop' process by which the local cultural norms inform the community's shift into new social regimes. The similarity of Archer's theory to the adaptive cycle suggests that it provides a suitable framework for a resilience examination of culture. Interview data drawn from the examination of two forest-dependent communities experiencing the recent loss of their forest economy through mill closure are ethnographically interrogated for broad cultural patterns. Results suggest that social regime shifts are informed by agents' use of cultural elements from the pre-closure period. Over time, these elements interact in complex ways as people draw on embedded culture in the reorganisation of their community social system in the post-mill regime. The role of these old cultural patterns appears to change over the period of reorganisation, with elements that both constrain and promote adaptation, complementing suggestions that culture maybe understood and investigated as a distinct process in the resilience of social or social-ecological systems.