

Book Review *Wild Partners: Indigenous Worlds and Industrial Giants in Papua New Guinea*

PATRICK GUINNESS

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Patrick Guinness' book *Wild Partners: Indigenous Worlds and Industrial Giants in Papua New Guinea* is an account of how the Maututu living on New Britain Island, Papua New Guinea (PNG), engage with 'outsiders', ranging from nonhuman others, people from other parts of New Britain and PNG, as well as people representing the state administration, and logging and plantation companies. The book focuses on how the Maututu understand and frame such relations, and how the Maututu have in practice related to the expansion of industrial oil palm planting on and near their lands. *Wild Partners* is a compelling and well-written account based on Guinness' long and many-sided engagement with the Maututu over a 40-year period.

Indeed, Guinness' work in New Britain—first as a researcher in the late 1960s, then his work as a field officer of the department of agriculture of the late colonial administration in the early 1970s, and his visits to his Maututu hosts in the 2000s—make this book stand out.

The central frame of the book is, as indicated by the title, the Maututu juxtaposition between 'home' and 'wild'. Depending on the context, the 'wild' can refer to the 'undomesticated' sphere of the forest and spirits, which is located outside the settlements and gardens, or the 'home'. The wild may refer also to outsiders, such as people from other parts of PNG, European colonisers, or company representatives. In yet other contexts, the home and wild may refer to facets of personhood and behaviour; for example, assertive and aggressive behaviour being wild. The 'wild' is both potentially dangerous and a source of new life. In relation to the latter, 'wild' is used to refer to forests, and the sources of new spells or wealth, and it is also used in the context of social action (which requires wild and homely behaviours in balance).

In short, the antinomy between home and wild is a central frame or scheme used by the Maututu to make sense of and establish relations. Guinness in turn organises his book around this Maututu frame, and shows how the Maututu seek to partner with various wild actors, or mediate the danger posed by them.

Divided into ten chapters, the book proceeds in a logical and loosely temporal order. The first chapter introduces the Maututu and sets up the home/wild framing and the second discusses how the Maututu organise relations using this frame. The third chapter recounts the emergence of cash cropping and the introduction of coconut and cocoa, and how the Maututu have made these crops, especially coconut, part of 'home', while the fourth focuses on the logging and oil palm industries. The fifth and sixth chapters then focus on how the Maututu have engaged with various forms of oil palm agriculture.

In Chapter 7, Guinness recounts changes that the partnerships of these 'wild others', such as colonisers and companies, have brought to the Maututu home world, including land tenure arrangements and kin relations. The eighth chapter deals

with another transformation, namely, in relation to industrialisation, missionisation during the colonial era and Christian revival among the Maututu in the 1990s. The final thematic chapter discusses how (at the turn of the 2010s) the Maututu sought to re-establish relations with an older ‘wild’ partner, namely their forests, through environmental conservation. Chapter 10 concludes the book by returning to Maututu myths and the home/wild frame, drawing stock on how the Maututu have fared with the wild partners and pondering what the future might be.

Guinness employs the concept of ontology, and the anthropological literature pertaining to it, to refer to both Maututu and European understandings of relations and environments, as well as how actors work across these ‘ontological divides’. Guinness also notes that, as an anthropologist and agricultural field officer, he himself was entangled in these multiple ontologies. Initially, I was skeptical of the usage of ‘ontology’, as I considered ontology to be just a different word for culture, and in many cases, I would have framed things differently, for example by referring to different values and value regimes. However, Guinness’ use of the concept of ‘ontology’ is down to earth and well grounded in Maututu discourses and practices as well as Guinness’ exceptional linguistic competence. (I suspect that many anthropologists working in PNG do not become as fluent as Guinness in the vernacular languages. I, for one, did not.)

When reading the book, I concluded that my preferred theoretical framings would not have added or revealed anything more to the reader than what Guinness does employing the term ‘ontology’. Here the richness of Guinness’ ethnography and command of the subject matter was what sold ‘ontology’ for me.

Just as the framing of the Maututu in *Wild Partners* is based on Guinness’ linguistic competence and engagement with his Maututu interlocutors, the parts on cash cropping and oil palm are also based on excellent empirical material. In these sections, Guinness draws both on his own research, his work as an agricultural field officer of the late colonial administration during the period of self-governance, as well as on documents and work of other researchers such as George Curry and Gina Koczberski. These chapters document how the Maututu made coconut and cocoa part of their ‘home’ and how they have engaged over time with oil palm and the various wild actors associated with it. The detailed accounts about the various forms of oil palm agriculture from large estates to settler and Maututu smallholder plantings deepen our understanding of the established oil palm industry in West New Britain (WNB), while also recounting how this industry and associated institutions, such as the state Oil Palm Industry Corporation (OPIC), were formed in the first place.

The oil palm industry in WNB, studied by Guinness, is long established and practices there differ greatly from the newer projects just across the provincial border in East New Britain (ENB). There is great comparative value in Guinness’ account, since many people living with oil palm in ENB hold the industry of WNB as a model. An historical account of the emergence of the industry is extremely valuable given that, at the time of writing, the oil palm industry is undergoing major changes with calls to regulate the industry through the introduction of new legislation to transform the OPIC from an extension service to a regulatory body.

Published in digital open access (of the non-rent extracting kind), *Wild Partners* is more readily available in PNG, something all anthropologists should consider

in relation to the dissemination of research and when thinking about publication models. It is not just for scholars of agrarian change in PNG and beyond but also for the Maututu and Papua New Guineans who are currently thinking about what do with oil palm.

Wild Partners is a carefully produced ethnography of how the Maututu make their home in a wider environment, which includes a variety of unpredictable actors. There are many monographs on this topic but what makes *Wild Partners* stand out is the author's linguistic competence, which enables his unique insights into Maututu understanding of relatedness, while the long time span of Guinness' own engagement with the Maututu, and his role as both researcher and agricultural extension officer, positions him as an agent in the change he has studied. I am convinced that the book will be of particular interest and use to the Maututu themselves as a historical record about, and by, wild partners who have in various ways become part of the Maututu home world.

TUOMAS TAMMISTO

Social Anthropology, Tampere University, Finland

tuomas.tammisto@tuni.fi