Response: The Limits of *Hard Work*

It is an absolute privilege to have five colleagues—Colin Filer, Jennifer Gabriel, Mike Wood, Sophie Pascoe, and Inna Yaneva-Toraman—comment on my book, Hard Work: Producing Places, Relations and Value on a Papua New Guinea Resource Frontier (2024). I have in many cases received key insights for the book from their research, so it has been a joy to read their critical comments. I wish to express my gratitude also to Matt Tomlinson and Diana Glazebrook for proposing and editing this forum.

Political Unecology and Geography: A Response to Colin Filer

Colin Filer makes several critical observations on *Hard Work*. First, despite my claim that the book is situated within 'political ecology', the ecological aspect is restricted to the first part concerned with Mengen agriculture and land use. The latter parts of the book, Filer continues, deal with the changing social relations as the lands and forests are revalued as 'natural resources' in logging, oil palm agriculture, and environmental conservation. Indeed, a central (albeit not original) argument I make is that 'natural resource' is a purely social category, and the result of valuation. Hence, Filer is not wrong in his critique.

Long ago, Andrew Vayda and Bradley Walters (1999: 168) criticised 'self-styled' political ecologists for dealing mainly with politics related to ecology and less with actual ecology, resulting in something like 'politics without ecology'. In *Hard Work*, and indeed in my research, I focus on the politics of land and resource use and changing social relations with scant attention to material and ecological changes ushered by industrial oil palm agriculture, for example. Similarly, research on how exactly and where plantation workers make their provision gardens and how they feed themselves would have been a valuable contribution—one that *Hard Work* does not offer. So, while I have drawn on the literature dubbed as 'political ecology', Filer makes a good point.

A second critique of Filer's is that I do not take into account political geography, namely how various land use and natural resource extraction regimes in Wide Bay have had their own geographical centres of gravity, sometimes explicitly created by local political leaders. This is a valuable insight, and in *Hard Work* I attempt to discuss the different forms of territorialisation associated with the resource regimes and how, for example, parts of northern Cape Orford and southern Wide Bay became 'local peripheries', far from buying points of cash crops as well as the centres of logging in the south, which I argue is one of the reasons people from the area moved to work on the new oil palm plantations (171).

It is true, however, that while I do describe processes of shifting resource frontier, I pay less attention to the role of local politicians in the process. In the part on logging, I attempt to show how Cape Orford and Wide Bay men were active in getting logging to the area and how they navigated the wider institutional and political realm. (In trying to make sense of this institutional and political realm, I relied heavily on Filer's work.) Filer's concept of centres of gravity of various resource extraction regimes is excellent, and I will engage with it in my current work on roads, state formation, and resource extraction in Pomio.

A third critical observation by Filer is that Toimtop village is a small, atypical community in Wide Bay, and not representative of all of Wide Bay, which is inhabited by five linguistic groups (Mengen, Sulka, Tomoip, Simbali, and Mali). Toimtop and the Mengen of Wide

Bay (and Cape Orford) are certainly not representative of the whole of Wide Bay, but this claim is not made in the book. Toimtop is indeed small, but that does not make it an atypical Wide Bay Mengen community. Toimtop is paired with the larger village of Wawas into a single-ward council. This is a typical arrangement, with the eight villages inhabited by the Mengen of Cape Orford and Wide Bay forming four ward councils.

What does make Toimtop atypical, as stated in *Hard Work*, is the local conservation area: in East Pomio, only the Sulka community of Klampun has one, and in total there are only four such conservation areas in the whole province (Klampun and Toimtop included). And while I lived mostly in Toimtop, the research that underpins *Hard Work* is not restricted to Toimtop but conducted *from* it with stays and frequent visits to other communities.

Finally, Filer correctly points out the lack of detail about how I conducted research on the plantation. I chose not to stay with people I knew on the plantation for long periods, in order not to single them out, but visited the plantation mainly by accompanying people who visited the plantation to sell in the market, to buy in the stores, or who were passing through. Additionally, I interviewed former plantation workers in their home communities.

Travel in Wide Bay happens mostly by foot or boat. I utilised the self-organized transport infrastructure, mainly speedboats, in Wide Bay, and often made my way on foot, staying overnight with people I knew for longer hikes.

Shield Groups: Responding to Jennifer Gabriel and Mike Wood

I really like that Jennifer Gabriel and Mike Wood start their comment with taro, and specifically by mentioning a taro nursery in Jacquinot Bay being moved to a more secure location due to fear of taro theft. That's a really interesting event. Also, I am thrilled Gabriel and Wood note that I start *Hard Work* with taro because, well … , *taro*! Not only does it taste good and keep one satisfied for the whole day, it also embodies whole worlds. So, yes, taro is a good place to start. And I wish I knew more about taro, so I could write about it more.

Gabriel and Wood mention the 'shield groups' of the Mengen: loose groups formed around a 'core' of members of a particular clan by their affines, crosscousins, and various associates. These groups comprising several lineage members are called 'nodal kindred' by Ward Goodenough (1962; see also M. Panoff 1970). The Jacquinot Bay Mengen call these groups *galiau*, meaning 'shield', abbreviated in the North Mengen dialect as *rglie* (or *glie*). These groups are mobilised for various purposes—typically, ceremonies, and in the past, warfare—as noted by Michel Panoff (1970: 193), who conducted research in Jacquinot Bay. Gabriel and Wood ask if such groups are now more like hired labour groups and if they still relate to particular big men and men's houses.

In the North Mengen areas where I have worked, *rglie* groups form more or less 'organically' around a common purpose. For example, when a person, a married couple, or a family group decide to initiate their children, or amass the bridewealth for their son, they call on the help of close relations, such as close clan memberscross-cousins (children of the father's clan), friends, and so forth. These people often also offer their help of their own accord. Men in this group clear a garden to grow the food needed in the ceremony, and women of the group are given plots in these gardens with the expectation that they contribute some of the food grown to the ceremony. Closer to the ritual, close relations contribute pigs, shell wealth, and money to the organisers.

In Wide Bay Mengen villages, individual hamlets or clusters of neighbouring households (often siblings, cross-cousins, etc.) share a men's house, which is located in the middle of the hamlet or the cluster of houses. In the case of male initiations, or if the house is in a state of disrepair, a new house is built by the people associated with it and those helping in the ceremony. Here too, the loose rglie group is formed or actualised.

When a ceremony takes place, such as an initiation, the organisers give gifts consisting of a pig, a pile of food, and, if possible, shell wealth and money to people representing important relations of the initiate, for example a senior clan member from a different village, representatives of the initiate's father's clan, and others who represent important or formative relations. Hence, the recipients of the gift are selected by the same logic as those who help in the ceremony i.e., are part of the *rglie*. In other words, it is this giving and receiving, contributing to gifts and receiving them, and working in the gardens that forms the rglie. (My response to Yaneva-Toraman below mentions that such 'family groups' also form to help men studying to become priests.)

Hence, in the Wide Bay Mengen case, the groups are not rigidly attached to particular big men or men's houses but are formed by people's relations. Of course, influential people can call upon, and often receive, the help of a large number of people. Such people, often elder men or men in important positions, can also mobilise people to whom they are related to work for their projects, e.g. help in building association houses, and here the *rglie* resembles labour groups. In Wide Bay Mengen (and Sulka) villages, people needing help for a particular task, such as carrying rocks for the foundation of a house, call upon village youth, a women's group, a village sports team, or another sort of group, typically remunerating the group with a small amount of money.

As for the competitive aspect, I think it is there: people do remember, even after a long time, the size of gifts given at particular ceremonies, and as Francis Be notes, money and store-bought commodities, such as rice and loincloths, are part of the North Mengen ceremonies. Especially in bridewealth, the amounts of money can be very high, and men especially talk about whether too much money has been given, if the amounts are inflated, and sometimes men mention that in the past, ancestors gave 'only' food, pigs, and shell wealth. By 'only', my intention is that in the past these resulted from considerable hard work.

Conceptual Work and Women's Work: A Response to Sophie Pascoe

Sophie Pascoe comments on two aspects of *Hard Work*: the concept of 'productive contradiction' and the work of women. I employ the concept of 'productive contradiction' primarily to examine a dialectical feature of Mengen social relations and especially landholding: the autonomy of named matrilines, or clans, on the one hand, and establishing relations between them, on the other. The most helpful way of thinking about these principles and processes for me was to think of them as values. Here I've drawn much on the work of Nancy Munn (1992), Dan Jorgensen (1981), Joel Robbins (2004), and Michael Scott (2007), who all discuss value antinomies, how value is produced or not produced, and socially productive tensions; and, of course, Marx in the first volume of Capital (1976) [1867], and on 'obstacles' to value production in Grundrisse (1973) [1857–58].

Pascoe notes that as a concept bridging the theoretical, it could be applied to other parts of the book, for example the relation between the socially productive 'hard work' and

wage labour, or to the relations with extractive companies and so on. This is absolutely true, and looking back, I realise I could have made much more of productive tensions.

At one point, in the very last paragraph of the sixth chapter (216–217), I try to conceptualise the relationship between the village, a site of socially reproductive and inalienated agricultural work, and the plantation, a site of alienated and exploitative wage labour in terms of the productive contradiction. The plantation, on the one hand, benefits from the reproductive work in the village, and workers can channel wages back to the village for reproductive work. On the other hand, people escape tensions in the village to the plantation, or leave the plantation because of its exploitative relations. This is however a brief discussion in my book and it comes terribly late, at the end of the chapter.

And in those instances where people debate whether some activity is indeed socially productive 'hard work', or something else, I could have employed the concept more robustly, for example in the anecdote on how cash cropping in and of itself does not qualify as 'hard work' if its benefits are kept within the nuclear family. Such instances are not clear-cut, and the person doing the cash cropping could argue that it is 'hard work' because the returns are used to take care of the family. (This is also a reply to Inna Yaneva-Toraman, who rightly picks up on this anecdote and asks whose point of view it is.)

The other related point noted by Pascoe is the work of women. I greatly appreciate Pascoe's focus on two examples of women commenting on land issues related to logging projects because I think both illuminate not only the productive contradiction but also how women take part in these predominantly male spheres. And as Pascoe notes, to talk about 'hard work' is to talk about women's work.

Like Pascoe's comment on 'productive contradiction', I could have done much more with women's work and gender. I do discuss these, but I also know that there is so much more to it. I am thinking, for example, about the work of Françoise Panoff (2018) [1972] on Jacquinot Bay Mengen ethnobotany, women's knowledge and use of plants, and multispecies relations. (Here I want to commend pacificcredo for republishing Panoff's work—in digital open access! When I returned from PhD fieldwork and stopped over at the ANU, the first thing I did was to photocopy Panoff's thesis.)

The Omission of a Central Topic: A Response to Inna Yaneva-Toraman

Inna Yaneva-Toraman points to an important topic that I omitted in *Hard Work*—Christianity. She then proceeds to discuss the role of the different Christian denominations in the context of Kairak speakers, who live in the Gazelle peninsula of New Britain, north of Wide Bay. In her response, Yaneva-Toraman focuses especially on how Christianity, and Pentecostalism in particular, have impacted values and how Pentecostal Kairak view wage labour on the plantation.

Yaneva-Toraman's commentary is important for two reasons. First, Christianity is, as noted, an important part of life in Wide Bay, New Britain, and PNG. Christianity and missionisation are also specifically related to the themes of *Hard Work*, such as changing value regimes and the expansion of plantation agriculture. Second, the context of Yaneva-Toraman's research in Kairak has been a central point of comparison because of its similarity but also, in important respects, its difference. As Yaneva-Toraman notes in her comment, and as I note in *Hard Work*, the Kairak have agreed to lease their lands for oil palm, while the Wide Bay Mengen have not.

In regard to Christianity, the Wide Bay Mengen case is similarly 'same but different'. The majority of Wide Bay Mengen are Catholic, and in some villages there are smaller but well-established congregations of Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) and even smaller 'revival' groups in some of the villages. In Wide Bay Mengen communities, Catholicism is an important part of everyday life: many are devout Catholics and Catholicism is the 'baseline'. By that I mean that less devout people still identify as Catholic, attend at least the major Catholic feast days, and so forth.

Catholicism in the Wide Bay Mengen communities coexists comfortably with the customary ceremonial tradition (kastom in Tok Pisin). The Catholic church has not sought to restrict customary ceremonies such as initiations, marriages, and mortuary ceremonies. These are central tenets of Wide Bay Mengen life, and important communal efforts, as are Catholic affairs such as the building of churches and the ordination of Mengen men into priesthood.

Elements of customary ceremonies such as the secretive *avlu* spirit figures (*tubuan* in Tok Pisin), which come to dance in initiation ceremonies, are also present at the inauguration of newly built churches and when a freshly ordained priest holds his first mass in his home village. The latter celebrations also include ceremonial gift giving, a feature of initiation ceremonies. In these, the family of the initiate gives gifts of garden food, pigs, and shell wealth to people who represent formative relations of the initiate.

In their comment, Wood and Gabriel mention the 'shield groups', which are composed of both clan members and important affinal relations such as cross-cousins. They are also mobilised by the close relatives of men studying to become priests. Members of these 'family groups' (*rglie*) collect money for the seminarian's studies, priestly paraphernalia, celebrations, and so forth, much in the same way they do for other ceremonies. Cases where people worked on plantations to gather money either for initiation ceremonies or ordinations are mentioned in *Hard Work*.

It seems to me that the Mengen were able to adapt Catholicism easily to their value system, and vice versa, and this is what Catholic missionaries sought to do as well. My other impression is that people dissatisfied with hegemonic Mengen communal life join revival groups. This is almost pure speculation, however. In a forthcoming publication (Tammisto forthcoming), I explore the historical processes of colonisation, missionisation, and the establishment of plantations in Wide Bay, but this too focuses on the political economy rather than on Christianity as a religion and set of values.

The omission of any meaningful discussion of Christianity and its relation to changes of values is simply a shortcoming of my book. Yaneva-Toraman kindly notes that Christianity may have been beyond the scope of my book, as I note in a disclaimer. Others working on similar issues, such as Yaneva-Toraman (2020) herself or Patrick Guinness (2025), have done so with great insight.

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