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Anthropology Book Forum

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Sophie Chao, 2022, *In the Shadows of the Palm: More-than-Human Becomings in West Papua*. Durham: Duke University Press, 336 pp. ISBN 978-1478018247.

In the Shadows of the Palm explores how the Marind people in West Papua - colonised by the Indonesian state - experience, conceptualise and contest the social and environmental transformations provoked by deforestation from oil palm expansion. This is a pressing subject in the current moment of global planetary environmental crises as commercial oil palm is the second largest industry driving global warming: dramatically reducing biodiversity and damaging the habitats of multiple species. Through powerful vignettes and magic-like dream narration from long-term, immersive ethnographic fieldwork, Sophie Chao masterfully captures how these transformations reconfigure the relations of Marind to each other, to other species and to their environment.

In a sense, this is a book about political ecology as the Marind seek redress for the violation of their land rights, their nearby environment being exploited, and themselves subjected to dispossession as the Indonesian state and settler corporations accumulate profits through the expansion of oil palm and the enclosure of common lands, forests and waters. In the book, Chao broadens the scope of dispossession by drawing on the strengths of ethnography and current efforts to decolonise multispecies studies. Chao suggests that by taking seriously the oil palm as an agent capable of violence, not just an object of human exploitation or a passive instrument of capitalist gain, allows us to conceptualise violence as a multispecies act where humans are not always the perpetrators and nonhumans not always the victims. This argument comes from Chao's efforts to theorise ethnography and ethnographising theory by attending to how her Marind companions blame oil palm itself rather than human actors only: state, settlers, soldiers, corporations and oil palm are 'introduced and invasive' (pp. 5-7).

Chapter 1 on Pressure Points starts with a political ecology background on land-rights struggle and state-led development through capitalist extraction of nature in Upper Bian. The state and corporate nodes of control over roads, military garrisons and plantations enable

certain kinds of movement but interrupt the flow of organisms that enliven the forest – they impose borders so that Marind people can no longer travel freely to meet their relatives in Papua New Guinea. This chapter has a dramatic vignette where one of the checkpoint soldiers was conducting an ID-check of travellers and demanded formal papers. Darius, Chao's Marind companion, cut his arm and wrote his name with blood, saying "Here is my identity, my blood. The blood of my land you stand on. The land you stole from my *amai* [plant and animal kin of Marind clans], the sago and dog" (p. 36).

In Chapter 2, Chao explores the tension between state-led mapping of the forest and Marind's own conceptualisation of living maps where "there are no straight lines in nature" (p. 53). Upper Bian communities have limited access to the official maps that stop their access to sacred sago groves. The chapter shows how maps not only bolster dispossession as they exclude places of cultural and spiritual significance and reduce political visibility, but also that they are 'dead maps' different from live maps illustrating animal movement and specific sounds as ways of understanding time and space to navigate the forests. Since oil palm plantations are silent, devoid of life, Marind are unable to navigate inside of them.

Chapter 3 "Skin and Wetness" is based on Chao's immersive everyday living together with Marind who still maintain their kinship relations with the sago grove and the other-than-human beings that dwell inside it. It describes how Marind become *anim* [human] by having 'good skin' and cultivating wetness (sweat, tears, blood, saliva-sharing) through physical and collective activities in the forest. Skin and the flow of wetness are emic concepts that are in dialogue with symbiotic becomings, or multispecies "skinship" [kinship via skin], through the flows of shared liquids and life across species lines (p. 83). Unhealthy looking skin and dry bodies reflect an imbalance that results in blockage of human and more-than-human social relations, Chao argues. Based on recent discussions on the materiality of pollution as well as that microbial becomings and the porosity of bodies, I wonder whether affect and oxytocin, as well as sharing of microbiomes, may also play a part in sustaining such shared personhoods. Another fascinating aspect of this chapter is the phenomenon of skin changing into the form of a different animal. The gripping story of Okto describes how he changed into the skin of a cassowary bird so much so over the years that his physical appearance and behaviour resembled that of a cassowary and provides insight into how being human is something that must be sustained, or it can be lost.

Chapter 4 on the ‘Plastic Cassowary’ focuses on how wild animals that due to habitat loss caused by oil palm plantations become ‘domesticates’ that lack both wetness and animal skin and are neither food nor pets. The chapter delves into the similarities between domesticates and ‘settlers’ who are Muslim Indonesian, as they eat ‘settler foods’ like rice, instant noodles and cookies – while Marind sustain themselves from sago palm. These settler foods are seen to be plastic and defy the logic of decay and regrowth. Humans and domesticates that eat plastic foods no longer participate in life-sustaining exchanges of bodily flesh and fluids (wetness and skin) of the forest. In this worldview, settlers (*pendatang*), plantations, products and pets are all plastic – and they also “invade and multiply” (p. 107).

This chapter also illustrates a key tension of the book: who are “the Marind”? One of Chao’s companions stated: “There are few native Marind left in Merauka. All of us are becoming *pendatang* [settlers]” (p. 106). Marind children do not speak the language, refuse to eat sago and eat noodles and rice, while young Marind men and women use urban cosmetics and whitening products to conceal their Papuan traits of curly hair and dark skin. Other Marind sell their land or seek employment on the plantations and are seen to trade Marind identity for an Indonesian one. This shows how diverse the interests, lifestyles and worldviews are of ‘the Marind’ and how things are rapidly shifting.

Chapter 5 ‘Sago encounters’ is an evocative description of the intimate enmeshment of Marind life with the sago palm and its agency to share space with others, to produce themselves as environments for others to flourish in and from through multispecies assemblages – for Marind the sago palm is kin, and eating sago is affirming their connection to other Papuan people. One of Chao’s companions stated: “True Marind are Marind who eat, encounter, and know Sago.” Given the way Marind are becoming plastic, one then wonders, who is Marind and who is not? What kind of politics of purity may this give rise, especially when both settlers and domesticates are seen as alien and invasive?

In Chapter 6, Chao argues that unlike sago palm, oil palm refuses multispecies relations. Here she develops the idea of a contrapuntal relationship between two vegetal beings: oil palm with its violence and asymmetry vs. sago palm and its harmony and complementarity. This raises the question of whether the oil palm is necessarily always bad, or if it has become a ‘monster’ due to disrupted multispecies relations as it is being forced into a plantation (c.f.

Tsing et al. 2017). Perhaps it is the mode of planting that is the problem, rather than the oil palm itself?

Chapter 7 describes how Chao's interlocutors perceive oil palm to stop time and their resistance to the development narratives of new oil palm projects, while Chapter 8 'Eaten by Oil Palm,' focuses on how the arrival of oil palm has resulted in an increased frequency of dreams of being eaten alive. It wraps up the intense and vivid interludes of such dreams throughout the book. By paying attention to dreams of being eaten by palm, Chao sheds light on socio-psychological trauma and dispossession in the wake of settler colonial plantation expansion. Marind are not only being deprived of land and money – but they are being deprived of their sovereignty, culture, identity, and a Marind life world. Here, Chao points out how oil palm plantation and settler (plastic) life sows fissures from within: those that do not dream, are traitors. Collective dream sharing thus becomes a way of foresting a collective narration to form new solidarities.

Overall, this is a brilliant book - beautifully written - based on rigorous and sensitive ethnography and sharp theoretical analysis that seamlessly blends ethnography with theory. Chao's respect and admiration for her interlocutors shines through the text and brings to life Marind skinship with sago and more-than-human becomings -and how this is under threat by the oil palm as an actor of multispecies violence. *In the Shadows of the Palm* is an important contribution to environmental anthropology and will be of interest to those interested in extractive agriculture, posthumanism, indigenous studies and settler colonialism, decolonising anthropology, political ecology and development studies – both within and beyond Southeast Asia and Papuan Oceania.

Camelia Dewan is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo on the research project Life Cycle of Container Ships: Ethnographic Explorations of Maritime Working Worlds funded by the Research Council of Norway. She holds an intercollegiate Ph.D. in Social Anthropology and Environment from the University of London (2017, SOAS and Birkbeck College) for which she obtained the RAI Sutasoma Award. Dewan is the author of *Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development and Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh* (2021, University of Washington Press).

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