

IN THE SHADOW OF THE PALMS

PLANT-HUMAN RELATIONS AMONG

MARIND-ANIM, WEST PAPUA

Sophie Marie Hélène Chao

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Department of Anthropology

Faculty of Arts

Macquarie University

Sydney

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Figure 1: In the shadow of the palms - sago fronds reflected in starch and water.

STATEMENT OF CANDIDATURE

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled *In the Shadow of the Palms: Plant-Human Relations among Marind-Anim, West Papua* has neither been previously submitted for a degree, nor submitted as part of the requirement for a degree to a university or institution other than Macquarie University. I also certify that this thesis is an original piece of research written by me. Any help and assistance that I received during my research and the preparation of this thesis have been appropriately acknowledged. I certify that all information sources and literature used are acknowledged in the thesis. The research presented in this thesis was approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee, Reference Number 5201500051 on 31 March 2015.

Sophie Chao (Student ID: 43794238)

SUMMARY

This thesis explores how indigenous Marind-Anim in Merauke District (West Papua) conceptualize and engage with the socio-environmental impacts of oil palm expansion. Drawing from post-humanist theories, I analyze how oil palm reconfigures the lifeworld of Marind through its effects on the landscape, on time, on Marinds' relations to plants and animals, and on Marinds' dreams. I demonstrate that widespread speculation among my interlocutors over the attributes and effects of oil palm stems from the fact that the plant itself is seen (and feared) as a willful and destructive actant. Yet many Marind also pity oil palm for its subjection to human exploitation, and express great curiosity about the origins, needs, and dispositions of this introduced plant-being. Giving center stage to plants as 'lethal capital' and their ambivalent relations to humans thus challenges us to rethink capitalism and violence beyond the human. It also highlights the need to attend to 'post-humanism' as a plural rather than singular category of being – one that is alternately embraced and eschewed by communities themselves treated as sub-human and killable within entrenched and emergent colonial, capitalist, and techno-scientific assemblages. Chapters 1 and 2 explore the effects of monocrop plantations and other state and corporate nodes of control on the landscape and its cartographic representation. Chapters 3 and 4 investigate how Marind become anim (human) through their bodily relations to other organisms, and how oil palm violates inter-species dynamics by transforming wild and native lifeforms into domesticated and alien beings. Chapters 5 and 6 examine the Marind practice of 'going to know' sago and its stories, and the contrasts Marind identify between sago and oil palm within an affectively and politically charged moral-vegetal spectrum. Chapter 7 explores the temporal rupture wrought by oil palm in light of Marind concepts of mythical and historical time. Finally, Chapter 8 attends to dysphoric dreams of oil palm possession through which Marind reflect imaginatively and collectively on their changing worlds and ways of being.

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