

Roads, Marketplaces and Plantations

Tuomas Tammisto

In March 2024, a group of people living between large-scale oil palm plantings in Wide Bay blocked the main road going through their village. Shortly before this, women from the village accustomed to selling food on the plantation had been expelled by the company. The villagers considered this to be unfair, and in protest staged the roadblock, which hindered plantation production.

This incident shows how food and infrastructure are entangled in numerous ways both on and around the oil palm plantations in Wide Bay, on the eastern coast of New Britain Island, Papua New Guinea. First, the plantations are highly infrastructured spaces producing palm oil used to make food, fuel and consumer products. Second, the oil palm plantation in Wide Bay was established in 2009 as a part of a plan by local politicians to bring not only income and employment possibilities, but also roads to connect this remote and rural area to urban centers (Tammisto 2024a: 157–62). Third, women from local communities sell food they grow on the plantation, while traders from town use the precarious road connection to come and buy rural produce from locals. In this photo-essay I describe how the plantation and local food infrastructure coexist, intersect and constitute one another, and the ways in which the unequal relations between the plantation company, workers and villagers are materialized in and enacted through food and infrastructure.

↓ *A local food market on the oil palm plantation during payday.*
Photo: Tuomas Tammisto, 2019.



Plantation Infrastructure

Along the seemingly endless rows of oil palms, roads are a characteristic feature of the Tzen plantation in Wide Bay as they grid the 7,000 or so hectares of plantings (Tammisto 2024: 179). After harvest the fruit of the oil palm spoils quickly (Li and Semedi 2021: 95). It must be transported to the mill within two days, where it is pressed into crude palm oil, the export product of the plantation. All fields thus have to be surrounded by roads, because workers first carry the fruit from the fields in wheelbarrows to the nearest collector road, and from there by tractor and truck to the mill.

The company has established several extensions to the main plantings in Wide Bay outside the original estate. They too are gridded by collector roads, but the connection to the main estate is by a single coastal road that runs through several villages located on ancestral land held and cultivated by the villagers under the customary land title of PNG's land legislation. In Wide Bay, most vehicular traffic is related to plantation production: trucks and tractors transport oil palm fruit from the field to the mill, while supervisors and maintenance workers – such as mechanics – move by car between the company locations.

↑ A man working as a harvester for the plantation company walks to the oil palm plantings.

Photo: Tuomas Tammisto, 2024.

The interface between local oil palm plantations and the global markets: palm oil is pumped into a tanker.

Photo: Tuomas Tammisto, 2019.



The palm oil mill is situated on the main estate. A pipeline runs from the mill to the shore, on land belonging to the neighboring village. Periodically, tanker ships arrive and palm oil is pumped onto them via the pipeline. The company hires villagers as stevedores who help the operation with their motorboats.

Taken together, this is the official infrastructure of the plantation zone, which is the area influenced by plantations consisting of the estate, all its plantings and the spaces around and between them (see Li and Semedi 2021; Tammisto 2024a: 179–86).

Local Logistics

In addition to the traffic related directly to palm oil production, there is a more informal food infrastructure upheld by village women who go to the plantation to sell things that they grow, along with the men who transport them and urban traders who come to Wide Bay to buy rural produce.

Inhabitants of Wide Bay predominantly grow the food they eat in swidden gardens, and gain monetary income from the cultivation of cash crops, such as cocoa and coconut, in more permanent orchards. They are, in short, food-producing peasants. Many local women travel to the plantation to sell food and betel nut – a mild stimulant used throughout Papua New Guinea – to workers.

Two women visit their swidden garden. Next to the plot are some previous gardens in the process of reforestation and in the background mature rainforest.

Photo: Tuomas Tammisto, 2024.





Women from nearby villages hitch rides on plantation vehicles or hire one of the few locally owned cars to get to the plantation. People from further away travel by boat, because the main road is in many places cut off by rivers or creeks. The few cars that exist in Wide Bay are largely owned by regional government, a local cooperative and some aid posts, as well as a handful of individuals.

A market-seller woman preparing to return from a far-away workers' compound on board an oil palm plantation truck.
Photo: Tuomas Tammisto, 2024.

One village close to the plantation is in possession of a car. It was left there when the previous owners scuppered it while crossing a major river – in itself a testimony to the precarious road infrastructure of Wide Bay. After several years of abandonment, some enterprising locals salvaged the vehicle. These men now operate it like public transport: their fellow villagers pay for rides, and women in particular hire the car to travel to the plantation in order to sell produce.

This village car is kept running through ingenuity and skill. A rather ancient vehicle, the local men service and repair it themselves. The main driver, a man who previously worked for a logging company, knows how to cross the rivers without bridges and the various routes to distant worker compounds among the mazelike road network of the plantation fields.

↓ *The driver fixes the salvaged car after it has broken down in the middle of a run at night.*
Photo: Tuomas Tammisto, 2024.



Traders from town hire cars and travel to the plantation and its logging compounds, namely as far as the road will take them. From there, they visit nearby villages and purchase betel nut by the bag. To venture further into Wide Bay in search of more betel nut, traders hire local boat operators who bring them to villages beyond the reach of the road and then back with their cargo. In town, these traders sell the betel nut wholesale to urban market-sellers. The work of villagers maintaining and driving the salvaged car, the boat operators and the peasant women selling their produce to workers on the plantation are all examples of “logistics in the margins” (Stenmanns 2019), demonstrating the effort, skill and ingenuity needed to make things move with limited built infrastructure and little technology. Indeed, market-seller women and local drivers “are just as skilled logistical entrepreneurs as the high-paid experts of multinational transport companies” (Schouten, Stepputat and Bachmann 2019: 782).

↑ Betel nut being packed into an oil palm fertilizer bag in a local betel nut grove.

Photo: Tuomas Tammisto, 2024.

Intersecting Infrastructures

Plantations require cheap labor, and labor is *made* cheap in part through food (Dennis [1980]; Tammisto 2024a). The plantation company sells food on wage credit to the workers, who also cultivate their own food on the plantation. Workers grow staples such as banana and sweet potato near their houses, on roadsides and – when the plantation was new – amidst the young oil palm plantings. Through these measures the company shifts the costs of the reproduction of labor onto the workers themselves, a common feature in the history of plantations – and of capitalism more broadly (Trouillot 1988: 66; Federici 2004; McKittrick 2013: 9–10; Besky 2024: 2213).

A market on the plantation during payday.

Photo: Tuomas Tammisto, 2024.





At the same time, while the provision of land on which plantation workers and slaves could grow their own food was part of a strategy by plantations to help maximize profits, for those who tended these areas they were also sites of autonomy, resistance and of rooting oneself in the land (Wynter 1971: 97–99, 101; Trouillot 1988: 77, 84; McKittrick 2013: 10). Indeed, Sylvia Wynter (1971: 99–100) observes how both “plot and plantation” emerge from the same historical process but represent two distinct values. These are, on the one hand, exchange value and profit pursued by the plantation owners; and, on the other, use values pursued by plantation workers, often from peasant backgrounds.

Workers coming from the nearby villages also receive food from their relatives, and the produce sold by local women is more affordable than that available in stores. For women in the villages, selling food on the plantation is an important source of income (see also Curry, Koczberski and Inu 2019: 241, 244). Yet the food sent by rural kin or sold by local women can be regarded as a ‘subsidy’ for the plantation, because it allows the company to keep wages at a low level (see Denoon [1980]: 4).

While the company benefits from the cheap food sold to workers, it has also on occasion sought to restrict market selling to certain times and to the formal marketplace of the plantation, in order to prevent workers from going to makeshift markets during working hours. As noted, locals considered this unfair and protested by blocking the main road in their village, thereby preventing the transport of oil palm fruit from the extension plantings to the mill (Tammisto, forthcoming). The roadblock was quickly lifted after managers came to discuss the situation with the locals. Officially, market selling remained restricted to the main market, but in practice local women continued to sell their food as before.

Conclusions

The relation between the plantation company and the neighboring villages is ambiguous. Some villagers work on the plantation and a number of women receive income from the sale of food to workers. The plantation company clearly benefits from the efforts of its workers and of the market-seller women. On the other hand, the relationship is highly unequal due to exploitative labor conditions, the company’s control of activities in the plantation area and the restrictions on the flow of money from workers to local communities, with food sold on store credit.

This ambiguous and unequal dynamic is materialized both in food and through infrastructure in the plantation zone of Wide Bay. The plantation company is able to produce cheap palm oil for global markets because its workers are kept cheap by food they grow, purchase from the company, receive from kin or buy from other locals. The residents, meanwhile, utilize the plantation infrastructure and have also created a parallel food infrastructure for themselves. The inhabitants of Wide Bay are skilled in logistics, organizing their own transport system and markets. Furthermore, if angered by the company, they are ready to disrupt the plantation infrastructure so as to make their voices heard.

↑ *Women return from the market along the main road running through the oil palm plantings.*

Photo: Tuomas Tammisto, 2024.

The road through the plantation: traders with their cargo of betel nut wait by the security gate.

Photo: Tuomas Tammisto, 2024.

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Discussion Questions

1. How is plantation labor made cheap?
2. What does it mean that relations are materialized in terms of food and infrastructure?
3. How do the inhabitants of Wide Bay live with and alongside oil palm plantations?

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