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Kuijpers, M.H.G.

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Review article

Ethno-deterministic perspectives on making and knowing

SILLITOE, PAUL. *Built in Niugini: constructions in the highlands of Papua New Guinea*. xvi, 348 pp., maps, figs, tables, illus., bibliogr. Canon Pyon, Heref.: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2017. £100 (cloth)

SILLITOE, PAUL. *Made in Niugini: technology in the highlands of Papua New Guinea*. xxiv, 636 pp., maps, figs, tables, illus., bibliogr. Canon Pyon, Heref.: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2017. £120.00 (cloth)

This book has failed to transmit the knowledge that it was supposed to impart: the tacit knowledge involved when building a Wola house or making objects. This stark conclusion is not mine, but that of Paul Sillitoe himself: 'While a considerable amount of ink has been spilled discussing embodied knowledge, few have yet faced up to the point that the only way you can really learn it is by doing' (*Built in Niugini*, p. 303, cf. p. 313). This is a somewhat underwhelming and remarkable conclusion to a superb 'traditional' social anthropology monograph, published as two volumes, and based on an intimate knowledge of a particular people and their language, the Wola of Papua New Guinea.

For the sake of clarity: Sillitoe's previously published book, *Made in Niugini*, is republished as volume 2 of this RAI series, while his latest work, *Built in Niugini*, is volume 1. *Made in Niugini* deals with Wola portable material culture, whereas *Built in Niugini* focuses on

house construction, and the problem of explicating tacit knowledge. Though originally planned as a single monograph, a gap of close to twenty years between these two publications has allowed the author to reflect on and reposition his previous work within current debates. This is especially interesting because his first book was unapologetically about making things (a rather unpopular topic at the time), and since then, the discourse around craft and materials has exploded as part of the so-called 'material turn'.

Taken together, the volumes come to nearly one thousand pages, two-thirds of which are found in the richly illustrated *Made in Niugini*. Given that I can never do justice to such a magnum opus, I should first briefly lay out how I have approached this review. Comments on *Made in Niugini* are deliberately kept brief. Several reviews were written when it was first published and these describe its content well (Burton 1992; Harding 1990; Lemonnier 1991; Strathern 1990). The first volume, *Built in Niugini*, interacts more with archaeology, and it is from this perspective that I have read this work. I also lean towards a general review rather than focusing on the detailed chapters describing Wola artefact making and house building, although it is these chapters that are of exceptional quality. The core of Sillitoe's work is without a doubt the detailed description of object manufacture and house construction, from which his ideas on tacit knowledge emanate.

Made in Niugini reveals an extraordinarily rigorous approach to material culture. Sillitoe describes 173 Wola objects in detail – a mammoth task. The book is helpfully organized in a standard format, and all artefact accounts are written according to the same structure, which greatly enhances the work's readability. Each account consists of (a) an introduction to the object; (b) a catalogue of the raw materials used to make it; and

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(c) a description of its manufacture. Sillitoe sets a standard of documentation that is awe-inspiring, to say the least. There are tables full of (quantitative) data on the amounts of materials used; the stages of and Wola terms for production, and the time each phase takes; drawings for each artefact and drawings to illustrate particular techniques; and photographs to top it all off.

What Sillitoe did in 1988 is methodologically close to what Ian Hodder (2012; 2018) recently has argued for in two publications. If you take Hodder's entanglement theory and messy 'tanglegrams' and do the hard work that sits behind such ideas, *Made in Niugini* would be the result, which is a telling illustration of how theory and practice may differ. Hodder posits grand theories, but he provides poor and fairly superficial examples to substantiate his ideas. Sillitoe's work, in contrast, is a highly structured, methodological, and organized 600 pages of data on material culture, yet he is reluctant to draw theory from it. Nonetheless, this is what groundwork should look like if we take material culture seriously.

'Ethnography, not theory, drives enquiries' (*Built in Niugini*, p. 1), Sillitoe argues. This data-driven approach is clear in both volumes as they rest on emic descriptions and do not favour a theoretical direction beforehand. There is some hypothetical discussion on this position in *Made in Niugini* but much more in *Built in Niugini*, where Sillitoe presents this approach as 'ethnographic determinism'. Ethno-determinism seeks out a balanced position between data-driven ethnography and postmodern concerns. Sillitoe sees theories as being like tools: you use them where they are needed and where they work. This is commendable and a healthy approach to theory, especially after decades of theoretically informed 'reflexive hyper-aware deconstruction' (*Built in Niugini*, p. 30), but his approach to theory lacks a certain clarity. He realizes himself that his 'mongrel attitude has irritated some critics' (p. 304) and that his approach can come across as 'opaque' (p. 309). This problem is made worse because Sillitoe does not fully explain ethno-determinism at first but lays out its defining elements in several chapters (notably 2, 9, 11, and 12). These diverse elements are built upon his view that we need to hold our etic perspective 'as loosely as possible' (p. 309).

While Sillitoe's approach of ethno-determinism makes for less exciting reading compared to provocative grand theories, at least the claims that are made in these two volumes are kept in check by ethnographic observations, and through this provide a healthy dose of data-driven pushback to some of the theories that are currently in vogue: notably, material agency. *Built in Niugini* is a study of how his ethnographic fieldwork resonates with the work of scholars such as Tim Ingold, Trevor Marchand, Lambros Malafouris, Nicole Boivin,

among others. And according to Sillitoe, it does not resonate well.

Sillitoe recognizes and intimately knows the relevant theories and work done in other fields. In *Built in Niugini*, he comments on materiality and material agency debates (chaps 4 and 5); while in regarding tacit knowledge he draws on business management studies (chap. 12), and neuroscience (chaps 12 and 13). Though all these links make sense, they also create a complex text that is particularly demanding to read, especially given that Sillitoe's own theoretical position – ethno-determinism – involves a rather convoluted approach. Throughout the work I found it difficult to follow his train of thought.

To show how he sees an overlap between disparate theories or fields, Sillitoe generously uses contractions between complex terms. A few examples: Cartesian-cum-structuralist (p. 310), theory-cum-ideology (p. 310), properties-cum-affordances (p. 107), participant-observation-cum-apprenticeship (p. 277), construction-cum-deconstruction (p. 247), and urge-cum-aptitude (p. 199), amongst several others. These are generally unhelpful and confusing, and quite frankly became annoying. How exactly are properties and affordances roughly the same, for instance?

There is also some tangential material in *Built in Niugini*. Chapter 4 is an attempt to bring archaeology and anthropology together, in the form of a written account of a seminar. In an already bulky book, this is a chapter that could have been cut or merged with chapter 5 to form a brief and sharply written summary of archaeology's take on the matter. Currently it is an unfocused and rather depressing read for archaeologists, since it mostly defines what they cannot do. It is also partly misguided because Sillitoe appears to expect archaeology to produce data similar to those of anthropology.

Most of *Built in Niugini* is concerned with a discussion on making and knowing, and one could read this volume as the theoretical addendum to the original publication: that is, if he were positive about theory. Throughout the book, there is quite a bit of criticism, especially of what Sillitoe considers theoretical wanderings and navel-gazing. Some of this critique is apt, if harsh, such as the analysis of materiality in chapter 4, relating it in its most crude form to environmental determinism. Other comments seem unnecessary. Criticizing to further your point is one thing, but much of this seems to me to have been written in a bout of frustration. Sillitoe is critical to the extent where it becomes simply judgemental and unhelpful: if you do not allow inquiries to be driven ethno-deterministically, you are 'cherry picking and dealing in abstractions and illusions' (p. 304). Ouch! Others have commented on his 'contempt for conventional social and cultural analysis' (Strathern 1990: 557) and 'curmudgeonly prose' (Lederman 1991:

624). Unfortunately, he has not changed his style in *Built in Niugini*. If his goal is to get his colleagues – and anthropology – back onto a more empirically driven route, this is not the way to do it.

Yet, crucially, Sillitoe's work continues to engage with one core question: how to study tacit knowledge? This struggle was already visible in his first book and it defines the second. As Sillitoe describes it, '[T]he book is not just about building houses but also about building understanding of the limits of our comprehension of other ways of being-in-the-world, or, to use the currently popular idiom, other ontologies' (*Built in Niugini*, p. xiv). This is undoubtedly correct as he wrestles with this concern throughout much of his writing, and it features heavily in chapters 4 and 5, but also in chapters 9–13 of *Built in Niugini*. He does so in a wordy manner, and especially in the later chapters the reader will get a sense of repetition. Sillitoe constantly returns, via different routes, to this core problem: that we cannot understand tacit knowledge unless we have this knowledge, and that we cannot know the other unless we are the other. In my opinion, these are unsolvable conundrums on which he spends a superfluous number of words. Surely this will drive some readers to the point where they exclaim: 'Yes, science is flawed. Get on with it!' (at least I did so).

It seems that over the years Sillitoe has grown more extreme in his position. In *Made in Niugini* he recognizes that: '[T]he problem is knowing where to stop, for, struggling to remain true to a Wola presentation, I should find myself writing a great deal in their language, which would defeat my anthropological endeavour of making something about their culture intelligible to my own' (p. 73). In *Built in Niugini*, as mentioned, he concludes that 'the only way to understand Wola house building is to construct a Wola house' (p. 313). If our endeavours to explore tacit knowledge are flawed to begin with, or even impossible, why write this book? Is it not the reflection and abstract discussion about behaviour with the goal of making it available to the scientific community that defines the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology, even if this is problematic and distorting at the same time?

Moreover, to conclude that 'you have to do it to know it' is a rather exclusive position that can easily turn into an authoritative argument. Music is noted down because this is how it can be shared and understood by others, but notes on paper are not music. This is exactly the point, rather than a problem. In the same vein, we need to seek a notational system that does justice to tacit knowledge, but it will never be tacit knowledge. We

would be craftspeople and not academics if we followed Sillitoe's approach. Ethno-determinism pushed to its extreme is to become *them*, at which point the *raison d'être* for the study dissipates.

To follow where the ethnography leads us does have a remarkable overlap with the approach craftspeople take. They regularly mention that while they may have an idea in mind, they follow their materials, in turn tweaking the original idea. Sillitoe recognizes this himself, describing fieldwork as an example of tacit knowledge (*Built in Niugini*, p. 309). However, craftspeople also know that they will never get it exactly right. Perfectionism, Sennett argues, is a behaviour trap (ironically, using house construction as an example). More to the point, 'the good craftsman avoids perfectionism that can degrade into a self-conscious demonstration' (Sennett 2008: 262). I would have liked to have seen Sillitoe do the same and work from his strengths: the extremely detailed observations found in both volumes. His exceptionally rich material surely is a good foundation from which we could further – rather than attack – theories on making things.

MAIKEL H.G. KUIJPERS *Leiden University*

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