

Paul Sillitoe, *Roots of the Earth: Crops in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983. Pp. xvi, 285, maps, figures, tables, plates, references, index, appendixes. \$35.00.

The title and subtitle of this latest book from Paul Sillitoe's prolific pen imply both more and less than what it actually contains. Those looking for a compendium of information on "Crops in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea" might be disappointed to discover that the book focuses almost entirely on the Wola people, one group of Mendi-speakers in the Southern Highlands Province. On the other hand, while sweet potatoes and other tubers contribute disproportionately to the diet of the Wola (as is true for other New Guinea highlanders), it is misleading to say that "the 'fruits of the earth' are largely roots" (p. 1). While such a phrasing leads to a catchy book title, the prospective reader might not guess initially that the majority of plant species considered here, and well over half of the Wola-named cultivars, are "Greens," "Shoots and Stems," "Fruits," "Inedibles," and "Other Crops" (covered in detail in Chaps. 3-7, pp. 53-136). Moreover, Wola crops "amount to only a fraction of their region's total plant life" (p. 2). Thus the book, which deals only with plants cultivated in gardens, is only a very partial "ethnographic flora" (p. xiii), albeit one focusing on the plants that will be of interest to the widest audience.

Despite these infelicities in labeling, however, there is much of interest inside the package for readers with a wide variety of concerns since it contains a potpourri of information, painstakingly collected during nearly three years of fieldwork, and organized, with varying success, around several goals.

"On one level this is an ethnographic flora, devised to facilitate the identification of the plants discussed" (p. xiii), presenting the "botanical facts . . . in layman's language with the intention of helping others to

identify and come to know the crops discussed" (p. 4). "On another level," Sillitoe wants to use the "floristic accounts as a map and compass," to explore "the factors that condition and circumscribe" Wola perceptions of their crops (p. xiii), that is, "to give a Wola-centric account of their crops: to describe how they see and classify them, how they cultivate them, how they think they grow, how they use them, and so on" (p. 1). Finally, noting a contrast in the ethnobotanical literature between studies that emphasize plant uses and those more concerned with classification or "conceptual ordering," the author seeks to "redress this imbalance [sic] and demonstrate that the integration of the . . . functional and cognitive approaches can benefit both" (p. 2). None of these objectives are fully realized, in part because of the enormity of the task involved, but also because Sillitoe was trained in neither botany nor ethnobotany, having begun his fieldwork with "no idea of the difference between a sweet potato and a yam" (p. 4). While he appears to have learned a good deal of botany since then, he still has a rather muddled view of the "cognitive" approach to ethnobiology which he hopes to combine with "functional praxis" (p. xiv).

The "flora," which takes up about one-half of the text (pp. 29-136), is the most successful part of the book, providing detailed accounts of each Wola crop, including Wola, English, and Latin names; the plant's probable origin; morphological descriptions (including effective line drawings); and discussions of Wola cultivars and techniques of cultivation. To some extent, Sillitoe works at cross-purposes in trying to provide information peculiar to the Wola (e.g., criteria used in distinguishing among cultivars, names for various plant parts or stages, parts eaten, and planting techniques) and, at the same time, constructing a guide for the horticultural novice (e.g., by discussing plant features "in English categories, some of which vary notably from those of the Wola," p. 12, n. 12). The result is neither a true "ethnographic flora" nor a completely satisfactory tool for the layman. Suitably revised, however (e.g., by substituting New Guinea Pidgin expressions, as provided in Appendix I, for the Wola terms), the "flora" could be a useful and inexpensive paperback field manual for anthropologists whose primary field concerns lie elsewhere.

The second half of the book addresses the goals of placing Wola "perceptions" of their crops in a wider context and integrating "functional" and "cognitive" approaches to understanding why they categorize and think about their crops as they do. Chapters 8-10 consist largely of previously published discussions concerning informants' disagreements when actually identifying cultivars and "genders" ascribed to various

crops. For the most part, these analyses strike one as ad hoc attempts to deal with a large amount of varied information, trying to find order in materials that apparently were not all collected with these issues in mind. The analyses are unsatisfying, in part because of their loose integration, in part because they are based on a rather confused understanding of how ethnobiologists order “concrete classifications” (with the Wola material not nearly as chaotic as Sillitoe makes it appear), and in part because of the author’s quasi-quantitative approach, with various “associations” and “correlations” asserted to exist on the basis of sixty-one figures and forty-six tables without a single statistical technique applied in the entire book.

The author has clearly put a great deal of effort into this compilation of what comes across as everything about Wola crops he could find in his field notes. Some of the data are unusual, most of them are interesting, and researchers with various special interests will find useful information and stimulating ideas. Sillitoe is to be commended for providing far more detailed ethnobotanical information than is customary from ethnographers, but an ethnobotany of the Wola, or of their crops, remains to be written.

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