THE PLUNDER OF AFRICA CONTINUES

The history of the last 500 years on the African continent is a history of the plunder of its resources and the violent exploitation of its peoples by foreign powers (particularly European) who accumulated wealth at the cost of the suffering (and death) of millions of Africans and the destruction of their resources.

The riches discovered by the first European navigators to reach the coasts of Africa spurred the various European powers of the day (Portugal, Spain, England, France, Germany, Belgium) to invade the continent and subjugate its peoples through armed force, eventually perpetrating the ultimate theft of claiming the right of ownership over these lands, and even over the people living there, who were traded as slaves.

The modern-day borders of most of the countries of Africa are the result of struggles between those European powers and have nothing to do with the territories of the native cultures who originally populated the continent, who were torn apart and lumped together according to the interests and possibilities of the colonial powers. The colonies of the German invaders were themselves swallowed up by the powers that defeated them in the two great wars unleashed to divvy up control of the world.

Among the many ways the invaders found to appropriate the continent's resources, one of the most typical was the establishment of large plantations (of sugar cane, cacao, peanuts, tobacco, oil palm and rubber trees) initially based on slave labour and later on semi-slavery.

Large-scale monoculture tree plantations are simply the continuation of the plantation model that was established during colonization, continued through post-independence neo-colonialism, and is further expanding today as a result of globalization.

Monoculture tree plantations don't just happen

Africa's enormous geographical diversity, the different post-colonial situations in different countries, the Cold War, civil wars, repressive or democratic regimes and the interests of foreign powers have all been determining factors in the establishment of different types of plantations in different countries. To illustrate, we could mention:

-Geographical factors facilitated or hindered the development of certain species in certain environments, depending on whether soil conditions, the amount of sunlight, temperature ranges and the availability of water were suitable or not for the species in question.

- In some cases, the post-colonial situation led to the breaking of all ties with the former colonial power, while in other cases the situation remained almost unchanged. This is a factor with important implications in terms of the presence or absence of foreign companies and markets linked to different plantations.

- The so-called Cold War resulted in some cases in the breaking of ties with former colonial powers and the establishment of regimes that forged new ties with the former Soviet Union, China and/or Cuba, which also implied changes in production models in line with these new markets.

- Civil wars (often linked with the struggles between the major world powers) served as a disincentive to long-term investment.

-Repressive regimes facilitated (through repression) the appropriation of the lands of local communities for subsequent use as plantations, while more open regimes left room for resistance to this new form of plunder.

- The different raw material needs of the large powers linked to the different countries determined their support for the establishment of certain types of plantations instead of others.

An equally important role in the expansion of certain types of plantations in certain countries has been played by institutions like the World Bank, African Development Bank and International Monetary Fund, which have used loans and the imposition of economic policy measures to promote the privatization of state enterprises and a model of export-oriented large-scale plantations.

In all cases, the FAO has played a key role through the imposition of the so-called “Green Revolution” – a grave misnomer – which endorsed monocultures and the accompanying package of toxic agrochemicals as the only alternative for the development of the agricultural and forestry sectors. Monoculture tree plantations are an integral part of this model, and the FAO has also played an essential role in their promotion by defining them (or in fact, disguising them) as “forests”.

We should also stress the role of bilateral “cooperation” agencies (particularly from Europe and the United States) in the promotion of certain types of plantations in different countries on the continent.

The combination of all of these factors (environmental, political, ideological and economic) gave rise to the current map of monocultures in Africa, among which we will focus exclusively on plantations of eucalyptus, pine, oil palm and rubber trees).

Eucalyptus and pine plantations in Africa

Large-scale eucalyptus and pine plantations are concentrated in southern Africa, and particularly in South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, but they are also expanding in Mozambique. There are smaller areas in Angola, Zambia, Malawi and Tanzania as well as a large clonal eucalyptus plantation established in the Republic of Congo by Shell Petroleum in the 1990s and now owned by Canadian company MagForestry.

In South Africa, the largest areas are in the provinces of Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, covering 1.5 million hectares of land. Additionally, an estimated 1.6 million hectares have been invaded by plantation species such as acacias, eucalyptus and pines.

Although the area planted in Swaziland is much smaller (100,000 hectares) it occupies a large percentage of the country’s land area (9%), and is aggravated by the fact that these plantations occupy the best agricultural lands. In the case of Mozambique, major plantations are still at the initial stage, but there are plans to establish large areas of pulpwood, sawlog and agrofuel plantations.

The industry in the region is dominated by two large South African pulp and paper companies: Mondi and Sappi, with plantations and pulp mills in South Africa and Swaziland, as well as paper manufacturing operations all over the world. Plantation species have changed from mainly wattle (planted for the extraction of tannin and woodchips) and pines (for sawn timber) increasingly to eucalyptus for producing pulp for paper and cellulose products.

It is interesting to note that, despite their dramatic social and environmental impacts, the vast majority of these monoculture plantations (in South Africa and Swaziland) have been certified as “environmentally appropriate and socially beneficial” by the FSC.

Oil palm: from natural stands and traditional use to monocultures for agrodiesel

There is a long tradition in the use of the oil palm in Central and West Africa, a region where it grows naturally. Until now, a large part of the palm oil used by local communities comes from the harvesting of fruits from natural palm stands and its processing is based on manual traditional techniques. The same is applicable to soap and palm wine. It is common for women to play a central role in either the processing and/or commercialization of palm oil, while harvesting is in all cases carried out by men.

Both during the colonial period and after independence, large plantations and related industrial plants were established in many countries. While in colonial times they were mainly aimed at the export of palm fruit and palm oil, they were later oriented towards supplying the internal market with palm oil and soap.

The recent surge of agrofuels based on palm oil has resulted in a strong incentive for foreign investment in more than a dozen countries, with the aim of producing large quantities of oil for its conversion to biodiesel. What follows is a brief summary of the main investment projects identified in a study recently carried out by WRM, (1) that shows a widespread process of appropriation of enormous areas of land by foreign corporations, with the central aim of producing agrofuels for Northern consumption.

Angola

- The Atlântica Group (Portugal), through its subsidiary AfriAgro has secured access to some 5,000 hectares of land (with the possibility of accessing a total of 20,000) for biodiesel production.
- Italian company ENI (in alliance with Brazil’s Petrobras) has reached an agreement with the government, for the latter to promote oil palm plantations to supply ENI with raw material for the production of biodiesel.

Cameroon

- The French Bolloré group is the main actor in the oil palm sector in this country, producing 80% of the national production of palm oil and holding some 40,000 hectares of plantations through its companies SOCAPALM, SAFACAM and Ferme Suisse. The company also has industrial plants and has recently declared its interest in the production of biodiesel.

Congo, R.

- Spanish company Aurantia announced its intention to invest in oil palm plantations for the production of biodiesel.
- Italian energy company ENI achieved access to some 70,000 hectares of land for planting oil palm.

- The also Italian energy company Fri-El Green signed an agreement for the planting of oil palm in 40,000 hectares.

Congo, R.D.

- GAP (Groupe agro-pastoral), a company owned by the Blattner Group, has 10,000 hectares of plantations.
- Canadian company TriNorth Capital announced that its subsidiary Feronia had purchased Unilever's "**Plantations et Huileries du Congo".** Within its holding of 100,000 hectares of land it would plant some 70,000 with oil palm.
- ZTE Agribusiness Company Ltd, a Chinese company, announced its intention of establishing oil palm plantations over 1 million hectares of land.

Ivory Coast

- PALMCI, a company owned jointly by the French SIFCA group and Singapore-based companies Wilmar International and Olam International, has 35,000 hectares of industrial plantations.
- Belgian company SIPEF-CI bought 12,700 hectares of industrial plantations.
- PALMAFRIQUE, owned by the financial holding "Groupe L'Aiglon" has 7,500 hectares of plantations.

Gabon

- The formerly state-owned company Agrogabon was privatized and is now controlled by Belgian company SITA. It has 6,500 hectares of plantations.
- Singapore-based Olam International would plant some 140,000 hectares with oil palms. In the framework of the same project, an additional 60,000 hectares would be planted by 3,000 local entrepreneurs.

The Gambia

- Until now only one company (the Spanish Mercatalonia) has presented an oil palm plantation project to the government and it is not clear if it will be implemented.

Ghana

- Belgian company SITA is now the main shareholder of Ghana Oil Palm Development Co., privatized in 1995.
- Unilever is the main shareholder of Oil Palm Plantation Limited, one of the main palm oil producers in Ghana.
- Wilmar International (Singapore) has recently become the owner of Benso Oil Palm Plantation Limited
- Norwegian Palm Ghana Limited (NORPALM), purchased in 2000 the National Oil Palm Limited plantations.

Liberia

- In 2009, Malaysian company Sime Darby signed a concession agreement over 220,000 hectares of land for 63 years. Some 180,000 hectares would be planted with oil palm.
- UK-based Equatorial Palm Oil Company, holds 169,000 hectares of land, of which some 10,000 have already been planted with oil palm.
- Indonesian company Golden Agri-Veroleum is finalizing a negotiation with the government for the establishment of 240,000 hectares of oil palm plantations.

Madagascar

Following a huge scandal involving a project that would have implied a concession of more that 1 million hectares of land to South Korean company Daewoo (of which 300,000 would have been assigned to oil palm plantations), the project appears to have been abandoned. However, there are two other projects in the pipeline:
- US energy company Sithe Global would have access to 60,000 hectares for the production of biodiesel from oil palm plantations.
- Cultures du Cap Est, company financed by an Indian group would have access to 9,100 hectares for the planting of oil palm.

Nigeria

- Belgian company SIAT, through its subsidiary Presco has some 10,000 hectares of plantations, with the stated aim of supplying the internal palm oil market.
- Italian company Fri-El Green Power has a concession of 11,300 hectares, with the option of extending it to 100,000.

Sao Tome and Principe

- Belgian/French company Socfinco (part of the French Bolloré group), through its subsidiary Agripalma has a concession of 5,000 hectares for planting oil palms. The aim is the production of palm oil for its further processing into biodiesel in Belgium.

Sierra Leone

- UK-based Sierra Leone Agriculture holds a concession of 41,000 hectares, 30,000 of which would be planted with oil palm.
- Portuguese Quifel group has signed agreements with local communities for the planting of oil palm, sugarcane and rice. A total of 40,000 hectares would be dedicated to the production of agrofuels for export.
- UK company Gold Tree plans to process oil palm fruits from both its plantations and those of local communites for the production of biodiesel. The project would involve some 40,000 hectares of land.

Tanzania

- Belgian company FELISA has a project involving 10,000 hectares of plantations, half of which its own and the rest to be established by local small farmers.
- African Green Oil Limited has a 20,000-hectare plantation project for the production of palm oil.
- Tanzania Biodiesel Plant Ltd holds 16,000 hectares to be planted with oil palm.
- InfEnergy Co. Ltd has 5,800 hectares
- Malaysian company TM Plantations Ltd, plans to establish plantation at Kigoma.

- Sithe Global Power (USA), plans to establish 50,000 hectares of plantations and to refine the oil in the country.
- InfEnergy (UK), has 10,000 hectares for planting oil palm.
- An as yet unidentified Malaysian group is planning to plant 40,000 hectares with oil palm.

Uganda

- Oil Palm Uganda Limited, owned by Singaporean company Wilmar in association with BIDCO, holds a 10,000 hectare concession, but the government has agreed to source 30,000 more hectares on the mainland, with 20,000 hectares of nucleus estate and 10,000 for the outgrowers and smallholder farmers

Rubber plantations: another land-grabbing monoculture

In the case of rubber plantations, Africa produces some 5% of global natural rubber production, with the main producing countries being Nigeria (300,000 hectares), Liberia (100,000) and Cote d'Ivoire (70,000). At present new rubber plantation projects are being presented and promoted in many other African countries.

One major actor in Africa appears to be the French corporation Michelin, with rubber plantations in Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Benin. The Singaporian Golden Millennium Group owns 18,000 hectares of plantations in Cameroon. In the case of the Bridgestone/Firestone corporation, its plantations seem to be established only in Liberia.

The Bridgestone/Firestone plantations in Liberia serve to illustrate working conditions in rubber plantations in Africa. What follows are quotes based on a report produced in 2008 by the Liberian NGO SAMFU. (2)

"Tappers work approximately 12 hours a day without safety equipment (gloves, goggles, rain boots, rain coats and other safety gears) unless they are bought by the tappers themselves. They have to carry all the latex they produce on their bare shoulders on a stick with two buckets weighing 70 lbs [31.7 kg] each.

This primitive means of transporting latex has not changed since 1926. With 140 lbs [63.4 kgs] yoked across their shoulders, laborers walk to weigh stations that may be up to three miles [4.8 kms] away from the grove of rubber trees. Firestone provides no alternative means of transportation. Rubber tappers doing this backbreaking work risk injury and the development of deformities the longer they are employed.

A tapper wakes at 4 o'clock every morning to get prepared for tapping up to perhaps 750 trees daily on a normal tapping day. However, only half of the daily rate of $3.38 is paid if a tapper fails to complete the full daily quota. Faced with these onerous quotas, tappers have little choice but to allow family members to assist them in completing their quota or hire a sub-contractor.

The tappers work every day of the year including national holidays, with the exception of Christmas day, producing high volumes of latex. An average tapper's monthly production can be valued at US/$2,296.80 on the ground in Liberia and US/$3,915.00 at world market prices while the tapper is paid US/$125. Out of the monthly wage of US/$125, he may have to pay one or two sub-contractors who helped him tap.

“These people are treating us like slaves because we have nobody to talk for us and we have nowhere to find a new job. You produce more than 5 tons of latex for the company a month and they don’t even pay you the price of one ton”, said bitterly a tapper.

Besides latex production, tappers are required to apply chemicals (both fungicide and stimulants) on the trees for protection and to increase production. In addition they are required to under-brush the trees they tap. This workload means that many of the tappers have to hire sub-contractors to get all the work done. In the instance where the tapper’s family is large and can not afford the deduction of their rice supply or salary for a sub-contractor, the wife is obliged to abandon her children to assist her husband in completing his quota.”

At the end of April 2007, workers engaged in a strike. During the strike on April 27, 2007, police reportedly brutalized peaceful striking workers with batons and sticks, chased harmless workers throughout the city of Harbel – where the Firestone rubber processing plant is located-, broke into houses and beat many innocent people which resulted in dozens of injuries. Two dozen workers were injured so badly that they were forced to miss work while they underwent treatment. Subsequently, one of the injured workers died as a result of wounds suffered during the attack. In addition, tear gas was fired into Harbel’s densely populated communities without regard for children, women and the elderly. It appears that many innocent workers were not only unnecessarily arrested, but unreasonably detained.”

The carbon sink land grab

The establishment of tree plantations to act as so-called “carbon sinks” is being promoted in several African countries, among which the preferred ones appear to be Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The projects are based on selling “carbon credits” (based on the carbon allegedly stored by the growing planted trees) to polluters (companies or governments) that can claim that through buying those credits they have “reduced” or even “neutralised” their carbon emissions.

One such case in that of the UK-based Carbon Neutral Company, that has established plantations in the Southern highlands of Tanzania. For this purpose, the company has occupied more than 10,000 hectares of land, where it has planted alien eucalyptus and pine tree species. (3)

Another case is that of Norwegian company Green Resources, operating in Mozambique, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. The company received strong criticism from Norwegian NGO Norwatch in 2000. (4) The company has already planted 14,000 hectares of mainly pine and eucalyptus trees. According to its web page “the company holds more than 200,000 ha of land for future planting and conservation”.(5)

One of the cases that has received wider coverage –because of its severe social impacts- has been that of the Dutch FACE Foundation, which in 1994 signed an agreement with the Ugandan authorities to plant trees on 25,000 hectares inside Mount Elgon National Park in Uganda. The FACE Foundation works with the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), the agency responsible for managing Uganda’s national parks. The UWA-FACE project involves planting a two to three kilometre-wide strip of trees just inside the 211 kilometre boundary of the National Park.

However, the project chose to ignore the rights and needs of local peoples living in the area. As a result, and in order to keep villagers out of the national park, UWA’s park rangers have maintained a brutal regime at Mount Elgon. In 1993 and 2002, villagers were violently evicted from the national

park. Since the evictions, UWA's rangers have hit them, tortured them, humiliated them, shot at them, threatened them and uprooted their crops.(6)

In sum, carbon sink plantations constitute another form of monoculture resulting in the appropriation a vast expanses of land, in the violation of local peoples' territorial rights and depriving them of their means of livelihood.

The need to support local resistance

With few exceptions, the issue of tree monocultures in Africa has received scant attention, both within countries affected by them and at a regional and international level. As a result, local struggles have not been made visible and have received little or no support. The cases of resistance in South Africa against eucalyptus and pine plantations, in Cameroon against oil palm plantations, in Uganda against carbon sink plantations and in Liberia against rubber plantations are some of the exceptions that have managed to achieve international attention.

However, as soon as some research is carried out on the issue, numerous cases of resistance to plantations begin to unravel, all resulting from plantations' severe social and environmental impacts. Resistance may in some cases be in fact impossible because of situations of widespread and severe human rights violations. However, invisible resistance becomes visible once conditions change and make it possible. A case in Togo serves to illustrate this. After decades of having lost their lands to oil palm plantations, the affected communities demanded their lands back. Not content with the government's response, they decided to cut and set fire to the plantations. As a result, the company lost almost 2000 hectares of plantations.

Within the current framework of projects that imply the appropriation of vast areas of land for the production of anything but food (agrofuels, pulp, rubber, wood, carbon), resistance movements appear to be almost inevitable and some of them will be confronted with extremely dangerous situations. In such circumstances, external support and visibilization of those struggles will be a matter of life or death for the involved communities.

(1) http://oilpalminafrica.wordpress.com/
(2) See full report at http://www.samfu.org/do%20files/The%20Heavy%20Load_2008.pdf
(3) http://www.carbonneutral.com/project-portfolio/uchindile-mapanda-reforestation/
(4) ("Carbon Upsets. Norwegian "Carbon Plantations" in Tanzania" by Jorn Stave, NorWatch)
(5) http://www.greenresources.no/
(6) see full report at http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Uganda/Place_Store_Carbon.pdf