
[Africa: Where palm oil is still a source of life](#)

These days, with so many companies jumping into the oil palm plantations business and with more and more extensive areas of forests being turned into this monoculture, it is easy to disregard the origins and traditional uses of the oil palm tree. The fact is that tens of millions of people in Africa, the centre of origin for oil palm, rely on this tree for food and livelihoods. And the tree and its traditional use are of particular relevance and importance to women. For them, palm oil is an essential ingredient in local dishes, a source for traditional medicine and animal feeds. African communities use every part of a traditional oil palm tree, from its roots to its branches to produce everything from wine and soups to soaps and ointments, and even a whole range of textiles and household materials. However, the global land grab for industrial oil palm plantations puts these people, the oil palms they look after and their traditional systems of use and production at tremendous risk. **A history of diversity**

Oil palms trace their origins to Africa. And it is in this region where the plant soon became an integral part of their food systems, local economies and cultures. According to research from the NGO GRAIN, in the traditional songs of many countries of West and Central Africa, oil palm is called the “tree of life”.

In Africa, most oil palms are still grown in the groves in mixed forests. These groves are often cared for and harvested by a particular family, passed down from generation to generation. Such semi-wild groves are found in large parts of Africa, from Senegal in the west, to the southern end of Angola, from along the banks of Lake Kivu and Tanganyika on the East African coastline, and even on the west coast of Madagascar. Nigeria contains the continent's largest area of wild or semi-wild palm groves, with over 2.5 million hectares. African farmers in West and Central Africa also grow oil palms, mixing them with other crops like bananas, cacao, coffee, groundnuts and cucumbers.

It is extremely difficult to find reliable figures on the area covered by oil palms grown in traditional systems in Africa, because of: 1) the difficulty of separating forest areas -containing oil palm trees as one of their components from natural palm groves where oil palms constitute the sole or main tree species; 2) the difficulty of distinguishing between “wild stands” and palm groves that have been part of local communities’ agricultural practices for centuries (some natural, some planted); 3) the difficulty of classifying palm stands as family plantations (that may or may not sell the fruit to an industrial processing unit) or as outgrower plantations contractually linked to an industrial plantation unit; 4) the existence of abandoned industrial plantations that are being used by local communities as if they were natural palm stands; and, 5) the lack of updated inventories of natural palm stands, small scale plantations and industrial plantations (See WRM’s “Oil Palm in Africa” publication).

According to GRAIN, the type of oil palms grown in Africa is also significantly different from those grown elsewhere. Most palm oil in Africa is produced from the traditional dura variety, which grows in the wild, and not the high yielding crossbreeds used on plantations. Many African peasants prefer it because it creates less shade and therefore does not hinder the growth of other crops on their farms. They also favour it for the quality of palm oil it produces, which sells for a premium in local markets.

In the local markets of West and Central Africa, the quality of a palm oil is typically judged by its colour. African women say that the palm oil extracted from traditional oil palms is better because it has a more intensively red colour than that extracted from the modern varieties. In Benin, traditional palm oil sells for 20-40% more in the markets than that from modern varieties. Women who use the traditionally grown oil palm also say that their traditional sauces made with boiled palm kernels have a lighter and thus better texture when made with kernels from traditional palms than with those from modern ones.

Palm oil in Côte d'Ivoire

Palm oil has long been the vegetable oil of choice in Côte d'Ivoire. The average Ivorian consumes about 10 kilos of it per year. It is used not only for frying but also as a main ingredient for many local dishes, from gombos and other sauces to various dishes made with plantains or fofou. Palm oil gives these foods a particular taste and colour that is highly valued in Ivorian cuisine. Imports and highly refined palm oil from industrial plantations and modern mills have taken a share of this market from traditional producers. But despite higher prices, consumers remain loyal to traditional palm oil, even in the cities.

Oil palms in Cameroon

According to Marie-Crescence Ngobo, from RADD, all parts of the oil palm, including its byproducts, are raw materials for making indigenous remedies. The Yambassa people in Mbam use the leaves of traditional oil palms to treat tooth decay. Palm wine mixed with various other ingredients is used as a remedy for male impotence, chlamydia, gonococcal infections, stomach ache, jaundice, and measles.

The Mvele, a Beti sub-tribe, prepare a meal of hearts of oil palm for new mothers, as it stimulates milk flow. Some other uses include the black palm kernel oil, which is used in skin and hair care and is an indispensable and ubiquitous ingredient in formulas for newborns. Further, coal made from the kernel also serves as a teeth whitener and communities in southern Cameroon use it as a toothpaste. Ash from the burned tree bark relieves boils.

Extract from a Béninois song (translated)

*What you can take from my song
Is this: that the palm tree standing there;
Anyone who wishes to benefit from it should care for it and worship it
Look at its leaves which are used for making brooms
Look at the parts which are used for making ropes to draw water from the well
From the palm tree, you get branches and cakes
On the same palm tree there are big stems which hold nuts
Look at the liquids it produces: palm oil and wine
Anyone who wants to benefit,
should know that we get the best quality oil from these nuts;*

****** This article was extracted from “A long history and vast biodiversity”, GRAIN, 22 September 2014,

