
A Century of Agro-Colonialism in the DR Congo

Many of the oil palm plantations now owned by multinational corporations in West and Central Africa were built on lands stolen from local communities during colonial occupations. This is the case in what is known today as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where the Anglo-Dutch multinational food company Unilever began building its palm oil empire. Today, these plantations are sites of on-going poverty, conflict and violence. There can be no solution to these problems until lands are returned to the communities and justice is realised for the harms that have endured.

In 1911, King Leopold of Belgium granted the British industrialist Lord Leverhulme vast concessions over lands that are within what is now the DRC. These forested areas, twice the area of Belgium, were full of oil palm groves, that the local inhabitants had cared for and developed over generations, converting what was once a savannah into one of the world's most important tropical forests.

Leverhulme wanted a cheap source of vegetable oil for his company's leading brand of detergent, Sunlight-- and he wasn't the only one turning to the people of the Congo for it. Palm oil, long an important part of food systems in Central Africa, was of growing interest to European traders, especially Portuguese traders who by then were regularly visiting communities along the Congo River to purchase palm nuts. The competition was increasing local prices for the nuts, much to the displeasure of Leverhulme. (1)

The concessions did not give Leverhulme's company, Huileries du Congo Belge (HCB), rights over the territories of local communities living within the concession, and there was supposed to be a process to demarcate the lands within the concessions. But Leverhulme was impatient and he pushed the Belgian authorities to grant him a monopoly over the purchase of nuts in the area-- under infamous "tripartite agreements" between Leverhulme, the Belgian colonial authority and local communities, who in reality had no say over the matter. From then on, locals were treated as thieves if they dared to supply nuts harvested from their own palm groves to anyone other than Leverhulme's company-- even though the open market price was generally three to four times higher than that paid by Leverhulme.

In 1924, Portuguese traders active in the area of Basoko, in today's Tshopo province, sent a letter to the Belgium colonial authority decrying the agreements:

"This contract concluded on 5th July last prohibits anyone purchasing in whatsoever fashion products deriving from the [oil] palm, be it nuts, kernels or oil, in the concession granted to this company [HCB], and what is still more detrimental to our interests, this measure also covers products harvested on land occupied by the natives.... The natives have strictly defined rights over the fields and plantations, and over the products harvested there. How then could it be acceptable for them to be forced to surrender their palm produce to just one company? Does this obligation not deprive them of the benefit of competition? What authorised representatives of the natives could ever have concluded, in their own name, a contract which brings them only disadvantages?" (2)

Leverhulme and the Belgian colonialists justified this scandalous monopoly on the grounds that

Leverhulme's company was making significant investments in the area by building palm oil mills and providing the locals with jobs, schools, medical clinics and churches. They also concocted, without any scientific basis, an argument that the palm groves were "natural" and not, as was widely known to locals and foreigners who spent time in the area, that the palm groves were the result of generations of care and work by local communities. If the palm groves were "natural", the State (i.e. the Belgian colonial authority) could thus claim dominion over them and more easily justify handing control over them to Leverhulme's company.

Neither argument held any weight. The schools that the company established were of poor quality and largely unattended by local children, who were busy labouring for the company anyways. The company's medical services were equally inaccessible to local villagers, and as one colonial administrator admitted: *"Even in the most favourable circumstances, it is still doubtful whether the benefits of medicine offset all the ills that exploitation of the palm groves causes the population ... The compulsory labour is generally too onerous ... The time devoted to collecting and transporting the fruit is often excessive, and the contribution made by the women and the children often puts impossible demands upon their physical strength."* The annual mortality rate around the Leverhulme's Huileries du Congo Belge operations was said to be at a "murderous" 10 per cent. (3)

Moreover, the employment provided by the company was in reality forced labour. In a letter from 1925, a district commissioner from Basoko wrote to the provincial governor about the labour situation at Leverhulme's operations:

"Recruitment of workers for the HCB has been for many years so unpopular with the natives that the moral pressure exerted by the territorial administrators barely prevails ... The whole of Aruwini district is rich, and a worker gathering natural produce of the forest (palm nuts especially) may readily earn a living and create resources not available to him through labour in industry or trade ... The only way to effect an easy transition between [forced] labour and free waged labour would be to pay the worker a wage that is at least equal to what he can earn without leaving his village or changing his habits. The only firm established in the district [the HCB] offers its workers a wage that in no way compensates them for their sacrifices." (4)

When it came to the palm groves, it was clear to anyone who had spent a minimum of time in the area that these groves were created from the labour and care of the local communities. The Belgian agronomist and missionary Hyacinthe Vanderyst, who spent years studying the palm groves in the Congo, published an article in the Belgian periodical Congo in 1925, in which he wrote:

"All of my own observations, researches and studies confirm in the most positive and absolute fashion the argument espoused by the natives... Conversely no one has so far openly attempted to prove that the palm groves are natural formations. This is no more than an assertion, wholly lacking supporting arguments ... The natives declare themselves to be the owners of the palm groves, and perhaps secondary forests, and this on several grounds: on the grounds that they were the original occupants of the country in terms of stable settlements, hunting, fishing and the harvesting of natural products; on the grounds that they were farmers who cleared and exploited the savannahs, which were thereby turned into forests, and later into palm groves; on the grounds that they were creators of palm groves thanks to their direct and deliberate intervention, which had involved introducing the oil palm into the country... For what reasons does the State deny these grounds, or refuse to take them into account?"

Vanderyst then warned his Belgian audience, "The question of the palm groves, if it is not resolved according to native customs, will remain open forever, because of its great material significance." (5)

Leverhulme and the Belgian colonial authorities ignored his advice. A few years later, the two sides moved forward with plans to demarcate more clearly HCB's lands, and enclose the local populations in their villages. Here is how one HCB managing director described the arrangement in a letter to the governor of Equateur Province in 1928:

"They [the natives] will be forbidden to move their villages and their cultivated fields outside the boundaries assigned to them, and they will be forbidden to gather fruit from palms on our land without rendering themselves liable to persecution ... They should remain confined to their reservations. ... We shall not allow them to take palm fruit from palms growing on our own concessions, in order simply to sell them to other traders; and if they engage in acts of violence against our workers or against our European agents-- as they have threatened to do-- we shall invoke the protection from the state guaranteed us by article 18 of our Convention." (6)

The 'Pende rebellion' of 1931 - in reference to the Pende People living in the southwest of what is today DR Congo – was one of the biggest rebellions during the Belgian colonial occupation. It started in the Kwango district, in particular in the territories of Kikwit and Kandale, areas dominated by HCB's palm oil operations, and one other company called Compagnie de Kasaï. One of the major reasons, if not the main reason, for the rebellion was the brutal policy of the colonial administration in the area, which, due to a lack of workforce for the oil palm activities, sent soldiers to the villages to violently recruit workers. The mortality among those recruited was extremely high: for every 20 workers recruited to collect oil palm fruit in and around Lusanga - the center of HCB's oil palm operations in the region - hardly 10 returned to their villages. The economic crisis of the early 1930s further reduced the wages of workers and led the colonisers to increase taxes, which worsened the overall situation. An estimated 500 villagers were killed in clashes with the colonial army during the rebellion, and hundreds more perished in camps where they were imprisoned under brutal conditions. (7)

From colonial occupation to finance capitalism

Leverhulme's company, which would later morph into the Anglo-Dutch multinational food giant, Unilever, eventually converted large chunks of its concessions into industrial oil palm plantations and stopped sourcing palm nuts from the remaining local palm groves. Over hundreds of thousands of hectares in various parts of the Congo, HCB implemented a racist and violent occupation of community lands according to the plan that its managing director described in 1928. For the affected communities, little changed as far as labour conditions, access to land and forests or the quality of medical, education and infrastructure services that the company was supposed to provide in exchange for this imposed occupation of the communities' lands.

Unfortunately, Unilever's plantations and concessions survived the end of Belgian colonial rule over the Congo in 1960. The empty promises of "development" under the colonial occupation were followed by the same empty promises under the Mobutu's dictatorship during the late 1960's (when the new DRC government took a minority ownership in the company and renamed it Plantations et Huileries du Congo- PHC). They were again repeated when the Canadian company Feronia Inc bought PHC from Unilever in 2009 with over US\$150 million in backing from European and US "development" banks, and then again most recently when the operations were handed over to a private equity firm based in the tax haven of Mauritius-- backed this time by university endowments, philanthropic giants and pension funds. (8)

In each of these iterations, the company's owners and investors relied on a set of manufactured land documents to justify their occupation of over 100,000 hectares of lands. When the consortium of

European development banks took over PHC between 2014-2016, they were aware that PHC's flimsy land documents had expired, and they pushed the company to manufacture a new set, fragmenting the concessions into hundreds of parcels, without consulting the local communities and without even passing through the appropriate governmental decision-making bodies. The development banks, like the owners that had come before them and that would come after, rolled out the usual justifications for this theft of community lands-- schools, roads, housing health clinics and good jobs. But today the communities and workers within the PHC concessions remain desperately dispossessed and therefore poor and the company's new private equity owners are once again promising that they will *soon* start adhering to the country's labour laws, that they will *soon* start paying minimum wages, and that they will *soon* provide functioning schools and medical clinics.

The communities are sick and tired of these false promises, and want to take back their lands to produce their own palm oil and other products, as they used to do generations back. But violence keeps the company in control. PHC has outlawed artisanal oil palm mills within its concessions and villagers caught with palm nuts are routinely beaten, jailed, tortured and even murdered by PHC security guards and police, who accuse them of "stealing" nuts from the company's disputed concessions. (9) Workers trying to improve their situation face similar violence. In early January this year, police called in by PHC opened fire on workers protesting unpaid wages at its offices in Boteka, badly injuring two villagers. (10)

The company's response to community demands for their lands is always that if it leaves there will be no employment for the locals-- as if no economy existed before Leverhulme entered the picture. PHC's former Canadian owners, Feronia Inc, even argued that it could not give the still forested parts of its concessions back to the locals because of the risk of deforestation!

This charade of "development" should have been quashed long ago. The lands that PHC and its predecessors have stolen and occupied for over a century are, as the Belgian recognised, "rich"-- and the local people know, better than any, how to care for and utilise these lands and forests for their own benefit. It is time to put an end to the colonial model of concessions and plantations, and its endless promise of "development". The rightful interests of the communities can only be served by an immediate return of their lands. Meanwhile, those foreign agencies claiming to be concerned with "development" should shift their focus to holding Unilever and the other foreign profiteers to account for this past century of labour violations, land grabbing and other abuses and preventing companies and investors from their countries from committing more abuses.

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(1) The information in this article about Leverhulme's colonial exploitation in the Congo is derived from Jules Marchal's incredible book, *Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts*, Verso Books, 2008.

(2) Marchal, p.54

(3) Marchal, p.60 and p. 89.

(4) Marchal, p.71

(5) Marchal, p.58

(6) Marchal, p. 109

(7) Wostyn, W. 2008. *De Opstand in de Districten Lac Léopold II en Sankuru (1931-1932). Een vergelijkende analyse met de Pende opstand (1931).*

(8) See, RIAO-RDC, FIAN Belgium, Entraide et Fraternité, CCFD-Terre Solidaire, FIAN Germany, urgewald, Milieudefensie, The Corner House, Global Justice Now!, World Rainforest Movement, and GRAIN, ["Development Finance as Agro-Colonialism: European Development Bank funding of Feronia-PHC oil palm plantations in the DR Congo," January 2021](#); [Oakland Institute, "Meet the](#)

[Investors Behind the PHC Oil Palm Plantations in DRC," February 2022.](#)

(9) Numerous reports and articles detailing these abuses can be found on the website farmlandgrab.org. [See here](#).

(10) [RIAO-RDC, "Policiers et militaires tirent à balles réelles sur des ouvriers de PHC en grève à la plantation de Boteka," January 2022.](#)