
Liberia: After the victory, the struggle: the tireless resistance of the Joghban Clan against EPO oil palm plantations

Even though it is surrounded by oil palm and rubber monocultures, the nearly 20,000 hectares of tropical forest comprising part of the Joghban territory is a symbol of the Joghban clan's victory in Liberia against the multinational company, Equatorial Palm Oil (EPO). In 2018, this clan of approximately 7,000 people, spread across 50 villages, secured part of the forested territory they had been inhabiting for centuries, which EPO attempted to seize to plant oil palm. Despite this victory, though, EPO continues to exert strong pressure on Joghban lands.

Originally a British company, EPO is now a multinational corporation controlled by Malaysian palm oil giant Kuala Lumpur Kepong Bhd (KLK). In 2008, after the end of the civil war that devastated Liberia, EPO acquired LIBINC Oil Palm. Since then, it has claimed control of 169,000 hectares in Liberia, of which it claims to have concessions to exploit 89,000 hectares. However, part of these lands overlap with the traditional territory of the Joghban, in District No. 4, Grand Bassa County.

The conflict between EPO and the Joghban clan intensified between 2013 and 2014, when the company began operating inside the clan's community lands without their consent. This period was marked by violent repression and strong resistance, leading to the consolidation of the Joghban's historic victory in 2018. The approval of the Land Rights Act that same year granted communities ownership of their ancestral lands, the right to make demands of companies seeking to exploit their territories, and inclusion in consultation processes such as Free, Prior and Informed Consent.

However, foreign companies have been exerting pressure on the clan's traditional lands for a long time, and continue to do so today. In the 1960s, two major plantation companies arrived on their land: LAC of the Socfin Group, which holds a concession for rubber plantations covering more than 12,000 hectares near Joghban territory; and the former LIBINC Oil Palm, now EPO. Today, the Joghban are surrounded by both companies' monoculture plantations, and they suffer countless impacts from this on a daily basis. Meanwhile, EPO's greed for the clan's territory has not abated.

What follows is a conversation with Theresa B. Sawah and Isaac G. Banwon. These two Joghban leaders and members of the Africa Informal Alliance Against Industrial Plantation Expansion played an active role in resisting EPO's invasion of their ancestral territory. They tell us about their victorious resistance, emphasizing that the struggle continues. As Isaac said, "Our victory is not complete yet, because the company has not tired of coming after the land; we need to raise more awareness in order to secure the portion of land we still have."

The first wave of land-grabbing: The arrival of foreign tree monoculture companies in the 1960s

WRM – What was traditional life like before oil palm and rubber companies arrived in the region in the 1960s?

Isaac – From before the 1960s to the present day, our traditional livelihood has depended on the land and forest: we cut wild palms, perform traditional farming, hunt, and do cooperative work as a community. Oil palm is the main commodity that has traditionally been grown in the region, and it is our primary means of survival. For example, cutting wild oil palm enabled me to go to school; I paid for my primary education and university tuition with native palm.

WRM – How did the arrival of the oil palm monoculture company, LIBINC at that time, and the rubber company, LAC-Socfin, impact Joghban communities?

Isaac - According to Elders and other sources, the company first arrived in 1962 and began negotiations with the government for land. Later, the Joghban clan and its surrounding territory were chosen for LAC and LIBINC Oil Palm operations. The companies took the lands they occupied by force. The communities didn't know about the agreements the government had made with the company back in the 1960s.

Theresa - They wanted our land for expansion; their people wanted to grab our land. We have learned from our forefathers that they used airplanes to survey the land without our citizens knowing about their intentions. Our forefathers tell us that, early one morning, the government took their men and their machines, and began to cut the forest. They took almost half of our land. Today our families are living on all the little pieces of land that remained.

Isaac - From that time forward, our communities have faced terrible life conditions due to these companies' actions. Such actions have included grabbing land, and employing plantation security forces, the police and the army of the government to burn down communities. In this situation, much violence has occurred, including rape, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, destruction of cultural and traditional bushes, and more (1). Women have suffered sexual violence and early marriages. Meanwhile, there has been forced migration of people from other communities that caused the separation of children from their families, and other abuses.

The second wave of land-grabbing: The resumption of oil palm exploitation with EPO after the civil war, resistance, and the victory (2008–2018)

WRM – What was it like after the civil war in Liberia, when EPO bought LIBINC in 2008? How did the Joghban react to this?

Isaac – In 2008, after the civil war in Liberia, when EPO had purchased LIBINC, the company occupied additional acres of land in our territory without the community's consent. The major abuse at this time was land-grabbing; the company wanted our land to expand its oil palm plantation. We lost our forest, and people in the community were afraid they would be evicted at any time to make way for the company's expansion.

Theresa - They started cutting down the forest. They started throwing those trees almost to the river. Everyone saw what was happening and our elders and our citizens went to stop them. They said 'no' to this land-grabbing. There we began to put up resistance that indeed no one was going to cross over for the second time because we don't have much land left.

Isaac - By then, the company met resistance from us members of the community, as well as civil society organizations, like Sustainable Development Institute (SDI). Equatorial Palm Oil conducted a survey in 2014, with the goal of delineating the area of their alleged concession. That survey attempt met strong community resistance. Women also played an important role in the resistance struggle.

As for the men, they were the lead advocates in protecting the land.

WRM – Could you tell us about your involvement in the community's resistance process against EPO's land-grabbing?

Theresa - I am a women's rights activist and Director of the Joghban United Women Empowerment and Development Organization in Liberia. The way women organized in these struggles was important, because the women helped the community to come together, to have one voice and understanding, and to work in one direction to bring our group together. Women were afraid at that time, but when EPO came in to grab our land, when they came with guards who were using guns and other things, and grabbing our men and beating them, we women came together. We gathered in the forest and decided to find food for those men who were on the battlefield. At that time, we prepared potatoes, yams, bananas, cassava and rice, so that after a violent encounter, our men would have something to eat. So this showed me that when women organize, it helps us to have one understanding and use one voice to struggle.

Isaac - I got involved in the struggle in 2013 and 2014. We traveled on foot from the community to the city to meet with the county superintendent. We organized a peaceful protest and petitioned the government in 2014. That year, then President of Liberia Ellen Johnson Sirleaf committed to helping the communities protect their lands from EPO's expansion. I was one of the delegates who met with the county Senator and petitioned him about our situation. I have organized a lot of meetings to resist the expansion of the company. It was this struggle that encouraged me to establish an NGO – the Institute of Sustainable Agriculture (ISA) – to defend the land through agriculture. I have been involved in this struggle ever since.

WRM – How did the company respond to the Joghban's resistance?

Isaac - From 2008 to 2014, the company put a lot of pressure on those who resisted; people were beaten, arrested by the police and company security, and later released. I saw my father be treated badly and dragged away in a security vehicle by plantation security and police during one of our peaceful protests in 2014. He and others have their own stories about the struggle.

WRM - Can you tell us about the victory your people achieved after the struggle?

Isaac - I still remember the approval of the Land Rights Act in 2018. The day was very beautiful and special. We celebrated our victory in the Joghban community; there was a great party and we even killed a cow.

Theresa - Now we can indeed protect this piece of land that belongs to us. It belongs to our forefathers. So from that point, we obtained registration and government approval for our land, and we can use these documents as legal proof and a tool to protect our territorial rights against future incursions by the company. No one will come and authorize land-grabbing in our lands. Whenever anyone comes, at any time, including any stranger from EPO, we can prove to them directly that this land belongs to us. My women will dare to attack that stranger, not to fight, but to ask them some terrible questions and tell them that they have no right to come buy or grab the land. This is our land for the Joghban women and citizens.

Isaac - What has united us in our struggle is having the control of our land today, tomorrow and forever. Even though we lost some communities and forest, our victory is that we still have some of our land. But our victory is not complete yet, because the company has not tired of coming after the

land. We need to raise more awareness to secure the portion of land we still have.

After the victory, pressure on the land increases (2025)

WRM - Can you describe your community's surroundings today?

Isaac - The migration of people from previous communities that were devastated in the 1960s to new communities has brought overpopulation and increased poverty. Our community is surrounded by plantation companies, which has other negative impacts on us. Amongst other impacts, we have suffered water pollution from EPO's production, and from LAC-Socfin washing their chemical containers in the rivers that we drink and get fish from. We do not have freedom of movement due to policies that restrain us from carrying our native palm oil while passing through EPO's plantation.

WRM – Can you give examples of the types of difficulties EPO has imposed on the community?

Isaac - The main struggle with EPO is related to the restriction of movement of people in the community. In 2022, the company created a policy that nobody should pass through the plantation carrying native palm oil; if you are caught carrying native palm oil, you will be arrested and questioned. And there are over 50 communities behind the plantation. So there is no freedom of movement for people living in these communities who get their livelihood from harvesting native palms, or who have their own small farm. This is the daily reality in the plantation.

Before passing through the plantation carrying native palm oil, we need what they call a “pass” from the company. And it can be very difficult to get this “pass” from EPO security. Sometimes, it can take you more than three hours to get it. This can make people impatient and want to pass through the plantation without getting the “pass”. Some days ago, I was traveling through the plantation with five gallons of native palm oil and I was detained. So it is a situation that happens every day.

Last year, a woman couldn't give birth. She was supposed to have a C-section at the hospital. Her husband lived in the village, so they had to call him to bring money so that she could have the operation. At that time, the only way to get money to pay the hospital bill was to come and sell native palm oil. He was traveling with some gallons of oil from the village coming to the town. He was stopped and had to wait the whole day for the “pass”. Before he was able to provide the money for the operation, she died in the process. The trauma still lives with the man because of the death of his wife. So there are a lot more things that happen when it comes to people's freedom of movement. Every day people complain, and we have sent the complaints about this to the central government, but there has been no redress.

WRM - How is EPO dealing with the expansion of their land, despite Joghban's victory and opposition to it?

Isaac- The company is not expanding now, but it is making an effort to expand. They are having many secret meetings with chiefs, elders and traditional leaders. This is a threat, because they have these meetings to convince people with money and other items, like rice. They also divide the communities using money and food, and by promising employment to some youth and elders. Their major target is the land, so we see these meetings as a threat to us.

WRM – Has there been any retaliation against the community to make them give up their land?

Isaac - The company is making life hard for community members so that they will give up the land. Additionally, the central government pays less attention to the communities around the so-called concession zone because the government wants to make sure the communities surrender the land to the company. All the surrounding villages are living in fear that at any moment the company will expand on our land; as such, community people are afraid to invest in cash crop agriculture.

WRM - There has been a lot of repression throughout this struggle. What gave the Joghban Clan the strength to fight?

Isaac - Our strength came from realizing that the land is our life, and, as such, it should not be taken away from us by any individual, plantation company, or government. We also came to understand that international organizations were there to provide support if communities were ready to resist the expansion of the company. The land is everything to us; we use it for medicine, food, housing, farming, and more. The land is our life and our natural heritage. We are going to resist, and always resist, because land matters to us and to our future generations.

Theresa - The forest is our life; it is everything for our people. The land is our life. So they will not take the land from us.

WRM – Do you have any message for other communities struggling like yours?

Isaac - To other communities that are in a similar fight, I would say that the first thing to do is to be united, to continue to resist lawfully, and to partner with other communities who have already succeeded in their struggles. And to the international community: your support is needed at all times if any community is to succeed in their struggle against plantation companies.

Reference

(1) Traditional bushes are our secret and sacred bushes where we consult with traditional gods and goddesses. We also get medicine from these bushes.

More information:

- [SDI and Friends of the Earth International, 2014. MEDIA BRIEFING -Liberian communities overturn Equatorial Palm Oil \(EPO\) land grab](#)
- Friends of the Earth International, 2014. The Jogbahn Clan ([video](#))