



Land Concessions: An Underlying Cause of Forest Destruction

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OUR VIEWPOINT

The Rush for Carbon Concessions: More Land Theft and Deforestation

This bulletin focuses on a central cause of large-scale deforestation and dispossession of forest peoples: The imposition of land concessions as an instrument to separate, divide and map land according to economic and political interests. In consequence, the editorial alerts on the grabbing of vast amounts of hectares for Carbon Concessions.

This bulletin pays attention to what the WRM Secretariat considers as a central cause of large-scale deforestation and dispossession of forest peoples: The imposition of land concessions as an instrument to separate, divide and map land (and forests) according to economic and political interests.

This is not an easy subject; it forces us to deeply reflect about mainstream perceptions of 'land', how these attempt to violently separate it from the rest of 'nature' - including its inhabitants, and how the colonizers and capitalist Elites have been organizing and using it according to their interests.

Some articles in this bulletin explore the colonial histories of how concessions were imposed and resisted across the Amazon, South East Asia and the Congo Basin. In some cases, like the articles focused on the DR Congo and Thailand, one can clearly comprehend the direct and deep implications that these histories have on today's continuous violence, discrimination and struggles around land. The article focused on the women's resistance in Brazil, alerts on how the privatization of conservation concessions is a serious threat to the livelihoods and cultures of local populations. Another article alerts on the international push to create more Protected Areas 'without people' and exposes the current trend of privatizing these Parks' management in the African continent in particular.

In close relation to this push for more Protected Areas, there is a serious risk of a vast expansion of another type of concessions in order to exert control over tropical forest land: Carbon Concessions. These concessions aim to control in particular the carbon commodity in it and other so-called 'ecosystem services'. Actors, such as international conservation NGOs, multinational corporations, brokers, banks, traders, certification agencies, governments and others, are competing in (and facilitating) the trade of carbon credits and offsets while expanding the means for land control.

Hundreds of multinational companies and more than 130 governments have committed to countless 'net zero' emissions targets, which in tandem with the push for so-called Nature-Based Solutions, explain the rush on Carbon Concessions. This big wave of climate targets also explains why such concessions tend to be much bigger than most forest carbon projects promoted so far.

In this context, for example, in late 2021, company Mayur Renewables PNG (MR), subsidiary of Mayur Resources (MRL), got three Carbon Concessions from the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government, covering approximately 800,000 hectares of forests. These concessions have a crediting period of over 30 years, and according to the company, these are “Nature-Based REDD-Carbon Offsets projects.” (1). The company’s aim is to expand to 1.4 million hectares.

PNG-based MRL aims to become the main supplier of “carbon neutral lime and cement products” in the region, and these Carbon Concessions are supposed to make its Central Cement & Limestone Project near Port Moresby into a ‘carbon neutral’ business. (2)

On December 2021, VT Carbon Partners gave MR a US 3 million dollars loan facility. VT Carbon Partners is a joint fund management from Viridios Capital and Tribeca Investment Partners. This fund was launched in 2021 with an initial 500 million Australian dollars (over US\$360 million dollars) portfolio to be deployed to ‘nature-based projects’ certified by Verra. With these large Carbon Concessions and expansion plans, PNG is set to become one of the largest carbon credit producers in the world.

During a webinar from 2021, the CEO of Viridios Capital stated that, “A whole new industry can be created here and potentially a new export market for PNG as well. Just thinking about the requirement for developed countries to mitigate their emissions (...), especially for neighbouring developed countries, like Australia and New Zealand, which need those offsets. And that would create a whole new industry in PNG, including local communities, who would need to be *re-trained* on *proper* forest management, science and academia training up on new technologies as well.” (3) (emphasis added)

This CEO must be thinking that a *proper* forest management is one in which the use of the forest is only for the profit-seeking interests of the concessions’ investors, and for which local communities need to be *re-trained* on how they should behave, and live differently from coexisting with and using the forest on their own terms.

Similarly, although receiving much more media controversy, in November 2021, an agreement between the government of Malaysia and Singapore-based Hoch Standard Ptd. Ltd. granted the company more than two million hectares of tropical forests as a Carbon Concession in the Malaysian state of Sabah on the island of Borneo. The plan was to expand the project to four million hectares. According to the agreement, foreign entities would hold the rights over these forests for the next 100 to 200 years. Global consultancies Tierra Australia and Global Nature Capital were also involved in the negotiations of the agreement.

In response to a flurry of attention from media and civil society organizations and groups in Sabah, in February 2022, the State Attorney General for Sabah put out a press statement in which she described the proposed ‘Nature Conservation Agreement’ as “legally impotent”. Ten days later however, and despite the many technical impossibilities that have been found to sign this deal, Sabah’s Deputy Chief Minister Jeffrey Kitingan said that “everything is good” with the Agreement. (4)

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An indigenous leader from Sabah reflected on this Agreement and on the absolute lack of consideration for the indigenous groups living in those forests, “Is history repeating itself? Are we not yet free or healed from our colonial and wartime histories?” (5) A very valid question indeed.

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- (5) Mongabay, Is colonial history repeating itself with Sabah forest carbon deal?, 2021, <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/12/is-colonial-history-repeating-itself-with-sabah-forest-carbon-deals-big-reveal-commentary/>

Colonization and Monoculture Plantations: Histories of Large-Scale ‘Grabblings’

The control of land was vital to colonisers. It meant wealth, territorial influence, access to ‘resources’ and cheap (and often enslaved) labour. The separation of indigenous inhabitants from their territories was a crucial component that persists until today. The effect of this history continues to influence the management of and conflicts over land.

Forest and agricultural policies the world over tend to regard land as just that: land. When it is perceived in this way, as simply a physical entity, ‘land’ can be easily mapped or divided up or rented out to others to use or regarded as a resource. This view of land emerged out of many decades of land enclosure and dispossession processes that were invariably carried out with force and accompanied by violence. The main purpose was to control land.

Most of the world’s land is today subject to some type of concession regime (be it private or public) in order to regulate its access, control and/or ownership. Concessions have been one of the main ways of organising land, forests and ‘resources’ since colonial times up until modern-day capitalism, granting select actors legal use or control over specific pieces of land while marginalising others. Together with the Bible, colonisers imposed a worldview in which ‘land’ was separate from the rest of ‘nature’, including its inhabitants.

As a result, most resistances against the history of imposed concessions, have also resisted the imposition of this euro-centric understanding of ‘land’, which is in line with the interests of the elites.

This view of ‘land’ has also distorted and undermined other concepts and understandings of life space. In the highlands of Sulawesi, Indonesia, for example, there is no word for ‘land’ in the peoples’ language. There is a word for ‘soil’ and several expressions for forests which express people’s *relationship* to it. There is no abstract category like ‘land.’ (1) And the concept of ‘land’ is not alone. During a meeting with an Indigenous Wixárika community in Jalisco, Mexico, in 2016, researcher and activist Silvia Ribeiro realised that people were using the Spanish language to refer to concepts such as ‘plant’ and ‘animal’. One community member explained to her: “We do not have a word for all animals that does not include us, or all plants without us, as if everything were one and we were not included.” Each animal, plant and living thing, just like every mountain, river, road—and even rock—has a name; because they are all subjects, part of the same continuum of beings that make up a territory’s community. (2)

Concessions by Dispossession: Controlling Land for Profits

The control of lands and ‘resources’ was vital to the colonisers; it was a strategy for accumulating more wealth, territorial influence, strategic access to ‘resources’ and cheap (and frequently enslaved) labour that allowed empires to flourish. They forcefully displaced, used and/or

eradicated indigenous populations in order to have access to their lands. This separation of Indigenous Peoples from their territories and/or of their autonomy over their territories was a crucial component of colonisation, and one that persists in contemporary conservation strategies and forest carbon offset initiatives such as REDD+.

The ways in which colonisers imposed their control over land differed from one colony to another, or differed by the type of resource they were interested in, according to the geography of the colony. They also often changed throughout the colonial period. (3) In the wake of this colonial land grab, companies and wealthy settlers associated with the colonisers appropriated enormous tracts of land and established their business operations. (4)

In **Southeast Asia**, for example, large-scale plantation concessions were first established across the region by European colonisers for expanding and solidifying territorial control. This included the pacification of civil unrest in rural areas by imposing new estates of control, and the creation of new sources of capital accumulation, via rubber, coffee, tea, sugarcane and coconut plantations. The colonial governments of the region supported the development of rubber plantations by granting loans to private developers, such as Malaysia's 'Loan to Planters Scheme' of 1904, and by granting lands at very cheap prices. In Peninsular Malaysia, areas considered 'wastelands' -although occupied and used by indigenous inhabitants- were provided to rubber investors. In French Indochina, where the rubber industry emerged in the 1920s, concessions were practically handed out to investors, which led to expansive land acquisitions that clashed with Indigenous Peoples (5).

The Agrarian Land Law that the Dutch colonial government promulgated in 1870 for what is now known as Indonesia, allowed foreign businesses and elites to occupy massive tracts of land. This Law contains the provision that "all land not held under proven ownership, shall be deemed the domain of the State". Consequently, the Dutch colonisers claimed ownership of most of the land in their colony while weakening Indigenous Peoples' control of their ancestral lands. This led to a surge of not only Dutch but also British, North American and Franco-Belgian investments, among others. Some companies had rubber holdings in the area totalling up to 100,000 hectares. This violently confined indigenous inhabitants into smaller and smaller areas of land. The effect of this history can still be seen today, as it continues to influence the character of land tenure in most parts of Indonesia: the State's disproportionate control over land is still a blight on Indonesia's politics and economy. (6)

British colonisers established a similar framework in Malaysia, focusing mainly on plantation-based economies that served long-term colonial interests. As researcher Amrita Malhi argues, "a regime of property' replaced 'customary modes of regulation' and established the colonial State as the sole and centralised arbiter of land and its distribution". (7)

However, British colonisers not only sought to consolidate their power through land control, but also to relocate the dispossessed population into more confined spaces. These new concessions of occupation -whether in terms of forest reserves established to study tree species and other productive 'resources', monoculture plantation estates or newly created villages for the displaced-

divided Malaysia's 'nature' and 'social' environments, allowing to generate more profits from the land. (8) In 1902, a Scottish capitalist, William Sime, and an English banker, Henry Darby, founded a trading firm in Malacca, with the participation of local Chinese businesspeople: Sime-Darby, the company which introduced the palm oil tree to Peninsular Malaysia in 1910 (9). Today, this corporation controls more than 620,000 hectares of oil palm plantations in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Another example is how the plantation system was utilised by British colonisation in the Americas as an instrument of land control and political power. The land on which plantations were established in North America and the Caribbean territories was stolen from Indigenous Peoples through cancelled, disregarded and fraudulent treaties, or outright violence. The monoculture plantation system of cash crops represented the early capitalist endeavours of the colonisers, who forcibly brought and sold millions of Africans as slaves to work on these plantations.

As these examples show, category of land concessions must be understood together with the rooted histories of colonisation, dispossession, conflicts and power.

These historical events led to dramatic transformations of forests and their inhabitants – transformations that are and will continue to have long-lasting devastating effects. The colonial framing that was imposed on how to perceive, understand and utilise 'land' continues to dominate Western knowledge systems. In a way, concessions, particularly those related to industrial plantations, today still represent spaces where land, livelihoods, law, and government are monopolised by, colonised by, and incorporated into the dominant colonial plantation system (10)

Concessions in Africa: violence, co-optation and racism

In Africa, European colonisers also granted vast land concessions to private companies. In fact, all major colonial powers on the continent used that strategy in order to expand their territorial control. By the mid-1870s, European colonisers had made claims to most parts of Africa. The most notorious case was arguably Belgian King Leopold II's rule of the 'Congo Free State', which was his private colony for more than a decade (1895-1908).

Within Africa, concessions existed in French, British, Belgian, German, and Portuguese colonies (including what is known today as Angola, Botswana, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Chad, DRC, Gabon, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe). While the form of concessions varied widely, a common element was the primary purpose of concession owners to extract 'resources' in the cheapest way possible. They were assigned powers that are typically associated with governments—such as a monopoly over violence and the ability to tax. Some colonies were completely run as concessions. For example, all of Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) was granted as a concession to the British South Africa Company. Additionally, the concessions were often granted in 'resource' rich areas. (11) Extreme labour exploitation, together with coercion and violence, was a primary condition for these companies to accomplish exorbitant profits with the concessions.

In sub-Saharan Africa, concessions to private companies were characterised by co-opting local institutions, replacing uncooperative leaders with compliant ones, and creating ruling lineages. With these tactics, concessions instituted a series of local strongmen who often continue to dominate village politics today. This is especially the case where concessions for monoculture plantations were established. Non-compliant leaders or rebellious chiefs were usually held captive, replaced, shamelessly degraded or murdered. Compliance with the rule of co-opted leaders was then achieved through extreme violence (12). As the European presence was mostly confined to the respective capitals and coastal cities, their ruling via co-opted chiefs and institutions characterised most of the continent.

While destroying local institutions, leadership and the social fabric, Europeans employed a variety of strategies to oppress the many resistance struggles and rebellions. These included forced-labour systems, extortion-level taxation on peasants, subjugation, and mass massacres. All of these conveyed deep consequences on today's politics and organisations.

In Sierra Leone, for example, paramount chiefs, subordinate chiefs, and headmen ruled the country's interior throughout the colonial era and were accountable solely to the colonial administration in the capital Freetown. The chiefs' power endured and even strengthened after independence. Paramount chiefs became part of the state administration, which often brought them into conflict with their role as Chiefs in the traditional governing systems. Throughout the post-independence period, such chiefs controlled land, settled disputes, taxed production, provided some public goods, and allocated votes to their preferred candidates in national elections. (13)

Many newly independent nations in Africa, largely still embedded within the colonial frameworks, decided to nationalise their land, thus appropriating the rights to its use so that they could allocate vast tracts to be used for major agribusiness projects by public or private companies, and even individuals. Millions of hectares were thus legally confiscated (again) from local populations.

In this regard, social and environmental activist and human rights defender Nasako Besingi, explained in a 2018 interview with WRM that "it is wrong for any government to claim ownership over land, discarding communities' land rights. As a matter of fact, the problem with Africa's land ordinances is that they were drawn up with the help of colonial masters, who, without the consent of the population, handed over the territory to the presidents, who were not elected by the population but most often handpicked by the colonisers to serve their long-term interests." (14)

The phrase 'all land belongs to the State', he continued, does not imply that land is owned by the government, but rather by the entire population living within the territory of a State. A government is best described as an agency to which the *will* of the State is formulated, expressed, and carried out, and through which common policies are determined and regulated in terms of political, economical and social development. Fulfilling those tasks does not translate into governmental ownership rights on land and natural resources of the State.

“Since I have been involved in community land rights’ movements and organisations in Cameroon and other countries”, said Besingi, “no single community I met accepted the idea that land is owned by the government. They say affirmatively that the land belongs to their communities and is an ancestral heritage. None of the communities I have worked with agrees with the presence of multinational corporations on their land, claiming that the companies were established through the use of coercive force.”

Categorising land and ‘resources’ as concessions is what has allowed the capitalist system to expand: Concessions for fossil fuel extraction, monoculture plantations, mining operations, large-scale corporate infrastructure, etc. Even the concessions under the ‘public realm’, such as those set aside for ‘conservation’, are entering the same capitalist logic of accumulation and taking control away from local populations.

The establishment of concessions, in fact, has been an attempt to erase the powerful resistance and survival of those who lived on those lands and forests before their imposition. When a concession is granted to a company or NGO, the histories, memories and the web of life that existed or continues to exist on that ‘land’ is made invisible. Concessions make people believe that the legitimate owners or users are *not* those who originally occupied, protected and worked on those territories. But as a Gitksan Elder remarked in a meeting with Canadian government officials over their claim to ownership of Gitksan territory: “If this is your land, where are your stories?” (15)

As Besingi remarked, a key aspect of communities’ resistance struggles in Africa is “to conquer the fear and ignorance deliberately instilled in the population by colonial and post-colonial administrations... Considering that long-lasting movements are those which are built from the base up and not from the outside, strong resistance can only occur when bonded with community concerns.”

Conflicts over land and resistance to the imposition of concessions today are thus embedded in much deeper historical struggles around opposite understandings of what ‘land’ and ‘nature’ mean. Communities’ reclaiming their autonomy and control over their land and lives are part of this re-occupation.

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Forest Colonialism in Thailand

British firms not only controlled 80 per cent of the established 'logging lands' in Thailand, but they also influenced the establishment of the Royal Forest Department, which came to have total power over the nation's forests. Massive land grabs and various colonial laws made half the country's territory into a colony of the central state.

A 19th-Century Concession System

In 1874, during the age of European colonialism, the Siamese monarchy based in Bangkok annexed Chiang Mai in what is now Northern Thailand as its own colony. Under the Chiang Mai Treaty, a Siamese forest concession model was imposed in 1883 that allowed European companies direct access to the region's large teak tracts, with much of the profit to be divided with the monarchy in Bangkok.

Between 1889 and 1896, UK's Bombay Burmah Company, British Borneo Company, Siam Forest Company Ltd. and Louis T. Leonowens Ltd., and Denmark's East Asiatic Co., commenced logging in earnest. (1) British firms controlled 80 per cent of the established so-called 'logging lands'. (2) They also played a role in the establishment of the Royal Forest Department in 1896, which came to have total power over the nation's forestry activities. A British national was head of the Department for the following 28 years, and British logging activities extended over seven decades.

Forest Colonies

Under the country's first forest law of 1913, the Forest Preservation Act, forests were defined very much in terms of colonial occupation. Any land without royally-granted title deeds permitting cultivation or house construction was considered under the control of the Forest Department. Accordingly, the Department was able to amass large areas of land for logging concessions on which farmers without land documentation were already living, relying for part of their subsistence on forests.

The 1938 Forest Protection and Preservation Act maintained the same spirit, defining forests as 'waste' or unoccupied land in the public domain. Similarly, the 1941 Forest Act regarded forests as land that had "not yet been acquired by anyone under the Land Law". These laws effectively made half the country's territory into a forest colony of the central state, annexing community lands, forests, fields and village territories alike.

125 Years of Forestry

Thai forestry activities and forestry science grow out of the history of teak logging in the country's North from 1840 onward. In Northern centres of the government such as Chiang Mai, Lampoon and Lampang, nobles had originally granted permission to various Chinese, Burmese and Thai Yai

(ethnic nationality across Southeast Asia) businesses to extract teak for a fee. Then, in 1855, the central Siamese state signed the trade agreement known as the Bowring Treaty with Britain. This enabled the British, as well as ethnic nationalities under British rule including the Burmese, Thai Yai and Mon, to expand teak logging in the region. Thus the British Borneo Company was already on the scene in 1864 as a timber purchaser, even before the formal annexation of Chiang Mai as a Siamese colony ten years later.

It was only in 1954-55 that the vast logging concessions granted to foreigners expired and were turned over to Thailand's Forest Industry Organization and provincial logging firms. By that time, the country's mature native teak stands were largely exhausted, and concessionaires were turning to other commercial species. The following decades saw the country's deforestation rates rise to become among the highest in the world, driven largely by the expansion of commercial agriculture but also by logging under the concession system as well as dam construction, both of which often opened up new areas for cultivation. Logging had a wide impact on forests that had been preserved and maintained by local communities for their own use, spurring resistance in the North and elsewhere in the country and motivating a growing Thai environmental movement. Logging was finally banned in 1989.

Authoritarian Conservation

As the logging era waned in the 1980s, the focus of the forestry establishment shifted toward commercial industrial tree plantations and forest conservation. But the pattern of internal colonialism remained, accompanied by growing local resistance to state hegemony over lands, including forests, used by millions of villagers.

Although the Thai government enacted two conservation laws in the early 1960s, the Wildlife Preservation and Protection Act and the National Park Act, it was only after logging was banned, 93 years after the Forest Department was established, that official conservation thinking really took off. Conservation areas expanded bit by bit, encroaching especially on minority communities residing in highland areas, first taking over former logging concessions, then expanding further in line with the recommendation of UN-FAO's 'experts' that Thailand should have no less than 40 per cent tree cover. As a result, ordinary villagers have been deprived of access to needed resources, government units have been set up close to communities to limit their use of forests, and many people have been evicted from their land. Violent conflicts between rural villagers and the state have increased.

The latest amendments to Thai forest law – following the military coup of 2014 that resulted in retired army general Prayut Chan-O-Cha becoming Prime Minister – include the fourth National Reserved Forests Act of 2016, the National Parks Act of 2019, and the Wildlife Preservation and Protection Act of 2019. Violations carry increased penalties of one to 20 years (3) in prison and fines of between US 600 and 60,000 dollars. Recent years have also seen legal cases brought against villagers for damage to 'natural resources' and for contributing to global warming. Residents on state forest land have been unjustly sued for damages with huge fines that they have no means of paying.

The new laws have greatly increased the power of officials to make arrests and seize property in National Park areas. To be able to stay on their land without threats of prison or fines, community members must obtain residence permits with a time limit of 20 years (4) as well as special permission to use the forests. Indeed, in many ways, National Reserve Forests and National Parks now resemble territories under martial law. There are strong echoes of the 1914 Martial Law Act promulgated during the First World War, which gave military officials power overriding that of civilian authorities, allowing them to search persons, vehicles or buildings at will; issue prohibitions; seize goods; build strongholds; expel the populace; and destroy or modify terrain or burn down houses to deny the enemy any advantage in battle.

Since the complex colonization processes of forested lands in the country, racist and oppressive views over forests and its inhabitants were imposed. This colonial mind-set has continued to influence national decision and policy-making, seriously harming forest communities, who are largely falsely considered as intruders or damaging the forests. This in turn is manifested with extreme violence and discrimination towards these communities and their traditional livelihoods and cultural practices.

Despite the difficult and forceful circumstances, forest communities continue to challenge and struggle against this oppressive context. In early 2021, indigenous Karen People from Bang Kloï returned to their ancestral home in the Kaeng Krachan forests, after years of dispossession due to the creation of the Kaeng Krachan National Park. Thirty people were arrested for “encroaching the national park”. (5) They are forbidden from returning or trespassing on the Park without permission. If they still disobey, they will be withdrawn on bail and sent to prison immediately.

It is clear that the Karen People fighting to have their territory back is not only about the land, but it is also about recovering their identity, culture, dignity and lives from a history of colonization and occupation.

Pornpana Kuaycharoen
Land Watch Thai

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Forest Concessions, Colonial Concept

What a certain historiography terms civilizational expansion or capital's expansion has in fact been the invasion and de-territorialization of peoples and communities using much epistemic and territorial violence. Concessions have been granted in areas that are not demographic voids, a colonial concept that ignores the fact that they have been populated for millennia.

*To the Mapuche Peoples
at a moment of recovery of their territories*

Recently, peasant populations of the Brazilian savannah (*cerrado*), known as Back Communities and Pasture Fencing (*Comunidades de Fundo e Fecho de Pasto*), have been questioning the legal instrument of 'concession of the real right of use' (*concessão de direito real de uso*) that has been proposed by the Brazilian state to regularize the lands traditionally occupied by them. Through this instrument, the state grants for a certain period of time the right of use but retains ownership of the land. This instrument has been used in situations where the social interest, including the environmental dimension, is recognized. A specificity of the *Comunidades de Fundo e Fecho de Pasto* is the common use made by these populations of the land and everything else that is implied – water, fauna and flora. Often in these traditional territorial units, families have land next to their homes that only they use, but at the back (*fundo*) there is a common use area, where fruit or wood can be gathered, including some pasture land (*pasto*) where animals can graze. When such common use lands are further away from people's homes, in non-contiguous areas, they are called *fecho de pasto*, but serve the same purposes as those termed *fundo de pasto*.

The fact that some of these communities are questioning the use of this legal instrument is noteworthy because it touches on the heart of the concept of 'concession', an expression that alludes "to the action or effect of granting, making available, putting at one's disposal; consent, permission". This questioning sets off from a condition of origin, i.e., their existence prior to the power of the state that self-attributes the power to concede. After all, the *fundo* or *fecho de pasto* communities constitute a territorial space of common use with a way of life based on customary law pre-dating the state, and not just chronologically, but also because these are traditional practices that continue to be current.

In fact, as a social group they demand the same as what international law recognizes for states as *uti possidetis de iuris*, the principle according to which those that in fact occupy a territory possess rights over it. Hence, they update a theoretical-political debate that indigenous peoples have been raising about their territories, whose origins pre-date the states of the current countries in which they live. These traditional peasant communities thus join indigenous peoples and the quilombola / cimarrones / pallenqueros communities, whose rights are recognized by ILO Convention 169, of 1989. This strengthens a recent trend in international law, as seen with the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In order for one to grasp how deep this process of recognition of rights is – of rights over territories already occupied –, note that one is dealing with processes not limited to these traditional peoples and populations, since all this recognition is intimately related with processes of decolonization following the end of the Second World War, chiefly in Asia and Africa (1) and furthermore, in the face of the massacre of the Jewish people in Nazi concentration camps. Since then, the rights of ethnic-racial minorities have been recognized inside states formerly considered uninational.

Recently, the indigenous peoples of America (2) took up again their protagonism, going as far as to question the exclusivity of the designation of the sub-region as “Latin America”, an expression that forgets the existence of peoples that have no Latin origin and that nowadays call the sub-region by their own name: *Abya Yala* (3). Bolivia and Ecuador declared themselves explicitly in their constitutions as plurinational states, in 2010 and 2008 respectively. Equally, other states recognize the rights of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and traditional communities to their territories even within states, thus no longer exclusively uninational.

The struggles of peoples and traditional communities call into question the colonial character in its continuity-discontinuity, given that “the end of colonialism did not mean the end of coloniality” (4). After all, the colonial way of thinking/acting and feeling – coloniality – outlived colonialism as a dated historical period. This is made clear by the permanence of the colonial concepts of ‘concession’, of ‘reservation’, of ‘guardedness’ or of ‘development’ that still persist in states and international agencies when referring to traditional populations or to concessions of forested territories. They forget that these groups/ethnicities/peoples/classes demand recognition of their territories and alternatives *to* development, and not development alternatives, in other words, living and coexisting well (*Ubuntu*, *Sumaq Qamaña* or *Sumak Kausay*) (5). These suggest other horizons of political meaning for life. And they do this by bringing to the debate an immemorial/ancestral time that calls into question the colonial time and its horizon of capital accumulation [always] in the short term.

This is not the time of our forests and of our territories inhabited since the Pleistocene, more than 19,000 years ago, as in the Chiribiquete Cultural Formation, in today’s Colombian Amazon region. How can a ‘forest concession’ be made while ignoring, for instance, the ‘tropical cultural humid forest’, as the Amazon rainforest has been termed lately? The Amazon region has some 39 billion trees grouped in 16,000 species, of which only 227 (or 1.4%) account for half of the biome’s total number of trees. Such species are known as hyperdominant. Among the hyperdominant species, there are 85 domesticated/managed populations whose dispersion and concentration were possibly influenced by human action in the past. It is known that *açaí* has been managed for at least the last 2,000 years, linked to areas of the Brazilian and Colombian Amazon forest where there is the formation of soils with so-called black earth, which are anthropogenic soils. The same has occurred for 11,000 years with the *bacaba* (*Oenocarpus bacaba*), the *pataua* (*O bataua*), the *murumuru* (*Astrocaryum murumuru*), the *buriti* (*Mauritia Flexuosa*), the *inajá* (*Attalea maripa*) and the *tucumã* (*Astrocaryum aculeatum*).

Classic studies show that practices grouped under the heading of ‘agro-forestry’ indicate that the hyperdominance present in the Amazon Forest was at least in part built through a process of co-evolution between indigenous peoples, plants and animals since the start of the Holocene. And not just in the Amazon. 76 families and 240 species of such plants have been identified on the basis of studies of seeds, xylems, phytoliths, starch grains and pollens preserved in sediments and archeological artifacts in Belize, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, the USA, Guatemala, French Guiana, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Venezuela.

Clearly, one is facing another paradigm, different from US/Euro-centrism, one that does not separate nature from culture or nature from society. Forests are not voids in terms of human occupation, of culture. Concessions of forest and other kinds (of lands or mining rights, for example) have been granted in areas that are not demographic voids, a colonial concept that ignores that these areas have been populated for millennia, as we have seen. For this reason, that which a certain historiography candidly terms civilizational expansion or capital’s expansion has in fact been the invasion and de-territorialization of peoples and communities using much epistemic and territorial violence (eco-cide and earth-cide).

This conflictive tension configured since 1492 in *Abya Yala/America*, nowadays takes on dramatic overtones with the struggle of the Peoples of Wallmapu, in the south of the continent. There, the Mapuche indigenous people has been retaking the territories that were violently seized against their concession, if you will allow me to use the term thus far used in its improper sense. New times are likely opening up, when we witness the Chilean Constituent Assembly, under the leadership of a Mapuche, propose on January 27, 2022, that the state rename itself a Plurinational and Intercultural State.

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(1) We consider that processes of independence from the former European colonial metropolises had already occurred in the Americas since 1776, in the USA, and 1804, in Haiti, followed by various other countries on this continent.

(2) We can admit that the resistance of the original peoples took place from the first moment of the process of colonial invasion/conquest. However, it is worth stressing the major rebellion that occurred in the Andean world, commanded by Tupac Amaru, Tupak Katari and Bartolina Sissa in 1781, which practically paralyzed silver production and contributed to the start of the independence processes led by the *criollo* elites.

(3) PORTO-GONÇALVES, Carlos Walter (2006). *Abya Yala*. In: SADER, Emir and Jikings, Ivana (eds.). *Enciclopédia Latinoamericana*. Ed. Boitempo, São Paulo and Madrid.

(4) QUIJANO, Anibal (2005), “Colonialidade do poder, eurocentrismo e América Latina”. In: Lander, E. (ed.), *A colonialidade do saber: eurocentrismo e ciências sociais. Perspectivas latinoamericanas*. CLACSO. Buenos Aires.

(5) Ubuntu among the Bantus in Africa, Sumaq Qamaña among the Aymaras and Sumak Kausay among the Quechuas in the Andes are concepts/cosmogonies these peoples use to designate their own ways of life, thus refusing to be identified with strongly ethnocentric concepts like development.

A Century of Agro-Colonialism in the DR Congo

Many oil palm plantations' concessions in West and Central Africa were built on lands stolen from communities during colonial occupations. This is the case in the DRC, where food company Unilever began its palm oil empire. Today, these plantations are still sites of on-going poverty and violence. It is time to end the colonial model of concessions and return the land to its original owners.

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 Kasai. 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.

GRAIN, www.grain.org

(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, Milieudéfense, 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: <https://grain.org/e/6602>; Oakland Institute, "Meet the Investors Behind the PHC Oil Palm Plantations in DRC," February 2022: <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/meet-investors-behind-phc-oil-palm-plantations-drc>

(9) Numerous reports and articles detailing these abuses can be found on the website farmlandgrab.org. See: <https://www.farmlandgrab.org/cat/show/511B> 260 - GRAIN_EN-dk.doc

(10) RIAO-RDC, "Policiers et militaires tirent à balles réelles sur des ouvriers de PHC en grève à la plantation de Boteka," January 2022: <https://farmlandgrab.org/30712>

No Concession at PETAR: Combating Privatization is a Women's Struggle in Brazil

This text comes out of conversations with women from the Ribeira River Valley who have devoted themselves to opposing the concession of one of the region's most important parks. Their struggle is fundamental, and part of diverse resistances against the privatizing trend of creating 'territories without people'. They remind us that their territory has been and is rooted in their stories, voices and resistance.

We wrote this text with many hands, from conversations and elaborations by women from the territory of the Ribeira River Valley – between Brazil's South and Southeast regions – who have devoted themselves to fighting against the concession (1) of one of the region's most important parks, the Alto Ribeira Tourist State Park (PETAR, for its name in Portuguese). The park, located in Iporanga and Apiaí municipalities, is currently administered by the São Paulo state government, and was included in a concessions plan together with other conservation units. This allows private companies (national or international) to gain the right to exploit commercially the part of the territory where the main tourist attractions are concentrated.

The Ribeira River Valley is the region in Brazil that harbors the largest portion of the Atlantic Forest biome, of which 70% is preserved. While in most of the country this biome was destroyed by megaprojects and real estate speculation, in the Ribeira River Valley local communities' relation with and defense of the forest have contributed to its maintenance. Since last century, the conservation policy conceived to house this biodiversity has been a policy 'without people', which created many parks and conservation units that restrict the ways of life of communities (2) in the territory. Only more recently, and through struggle, have some areas gone over to what is termed sustainable use areas. These units are of a type created by Brazil's National Conservation Units System, and were meant to operate under a regime that tolerates the presence of communities in the territories. This is not entirely the case in practice, seen as even in these locations there are many conflicts between people's ways of life and the rules of Conservation Units. As a rule, the way environmental and land issues are resolved in the Ribeira River Valley is through the expulsion – forced or by wearing down – of the communities that inhabit it.

Advances in terms of the implementation of more sustainable use areas – where one can practice traditional agriculture, even though permission is required – have allowed communities to remain on the territory. But their real demand has always been the regularization of land ownership. Although they have inhabited the territory for centuries, most communities do not have their lands demarcated or deeds for them, which generates great insecurity. Land conflicts have worsened in Brazil with new policies of digitalization of territorial organization, like the Rural Environmental Registry (CAR) (3). In other words, these communities continue to this day fighting for their right to land, as well as fighting in parallel against the environmental policy, especially in the parks.

Privatizing the concession for 30 years: displacements, insecurity and gentrification

This is the case of *quilombola* and *cabocla* communities in Iporanga municipality that were superimposed by the Alto Ribeira Tourist State Park (PETAR). Ana Ercilia – a resident of Iporanga since her childhood, environmental monitor and involved in the current struggle against the concession of the park to the private sector – relates that in 1958, at the time when the park was created, people from the territory believed it would be an amusement park, such was the absence of dialogue and transparency of the authorities vis-à-vis the communities. After some time, they came to understand the actual kind of park that had arrived at the territory, already by then owing to restrictions in access to services like electricity, and when people started being prevented from upgrading or enlarging their own homes and yards. Since then, there began a struggle to push back PETAR's limits to no longer include Bairro da Serra, a district that was 'cut in half' when the park was established. Much of its territory ended up inside the park. Bairro da Serra harbors both traditional communities and long-standing residents of Iporanga, as well as important items of Ribeira River Valley's historical and cultural heritage. The struggle of the dwellers, through their association, ensured an agreement that redrew the park limits so that people's homes stayed outside the zone with restrictions. However, the farmland remained inside the conservation unit, which greatly restricted people's way of life and meant that tourism work became families' only source of income.

The park limits were redrawn but the land ownership regularization of the Bairro da Serra community did not happen. Several families have been displaced by the park to this district, which is in PETAR's surrounding buffer zone, but the displacement was not accompanied by deeds to the land. The families only have a provisional right to remain, which does not guarantee that the park will not resettle them. (4) This situation is particularly difficult for the women, whose work is concentrated in their own yards and who earn a living mostly from their work there and at various local business initiatives.

Currently, the communities are facing a new offensive onto the territory. The São Paulo state government, based on its privatist policy, has opened an international tender process for the concession of an area of the park – where most of the main tourist attractions are located – for a period of 30 years. This took place in the second half of 2021, already during the pandemic, and without any public consultation whatsoever. Since then, a broad resistance movement against the concession of the park has emerged.

The struggle against the concession is organized with the involvement of residents, peoples and communities, researchers, activists and supporters in general. Women make up a major share of this resistance. Based on their self-organization, they have demonstrated that they are particularly impacted when the government chooses to strengthen public-private partnerships in this way. The question of land regularization, for instance, is being completely ignored in this process. That a private company could literally own the territory for 30 years and that the families, especially the women, should continue to live with the insecurity of not owning their land is an aberration. It

clearly demonstrates that the state's intention in promoting this concession is not improving communities' quality of life, as it alleges.

Even though the park was imposed upon the communities in the 1950s, over time they appropriated it as best they could. Owing to the intense restrictions placed on their way of life, one of the main sources of income that dwellers have today is community based, autonomously organized work in tourism as environmental monitors. Currently, there are 250 monitors registered with PETAR. Visitors usually hire them, and their presence is compulsory in the case of visits to the caves. They are residents of the communities and beyond presenting the park's attractions they talk about the history of the Ribeira River Valley and the communities where they live. The organization of monitorship as paid work was part of the negotiations between the state government and the communities as an alternative source of income in the face of restrictions to the use of the territory and to customary practices that were turned into environmental crimes. One of the changes proposed in the privatization RFP specs is that tourists may self-guide inside the park, which would make it even harder for the environmental monitors to obtain an income, as they would cease to be essential to the tourists.

With the concession, communities – and especially women, who run the various small businesses in the area surrounding the park – will cease having a leading role in the tourism field. The concession holder will take on that role. For example, the concession plan involves greatly increasing the number of yearly visits to the park, creating trails for vehicles and publicizing new attractions. The women fighting the concession argue that with these initiatives the government wants to impose another type of tourism on the territory. Instead of people interested in getting to know the communities through the local guides, who are also sources of knowledge about local ways of life, it wants tourism organized by companies that are likely to prioritize the hiring of bilingual guides, for example, rather than members of the local community.

This tourism package undoes the “bread-winning flow”, a kind of economy constructed over time by the communities, which are themselves set to become just another tourist attraction. This new and extremely colonialist tendency has worsened under the neoliberal government of São Paulo state, which is implementing a development program called “Valley of the Future”. Communities other than the ones surrounding PETAR have been classed as tourist attractions by this program, including with signs on highways, without any kind of consultation or dialogue with the communities about this. So the community becomes a foreigner in its own territory. Gentrification, likely to happen via the construction of hotels and higher ticket prices – actions forecast in the concession process –, will make it impossible for community members to access the park, a place they know well and where they enjoy spending time.

The effect forecast is not the valuing of communities and the building of economic alternatives. Rather, people fear they will be pushed out of their territory more and more, and will find themselves forced to migrate to the peripheries of the surrounding cities, a trend already observed particularly among the young, who have not remained in the territory. Furthermore, for the ones that do remain, there is concern about increasing sexual violence and objectification of women's

bodies with the significant inflow of men from the outside. The concession of the park also has no matching measures in terms of improving the public policies that service the community. Given that the concession, if granted, will last 30 years, the women are especially concerned about their young children, who will spend their childhood, adolescence and early adult life in this privatized territory.

This privatization is taking place at the same time as the “Valley of the Future” project advances in the Ribeira River Valley, which also raises doubts as to how the exploitation of the territory will take place. The main front of this development project has so far been opening up the region to mining. (The whole region of Iporanga, including the area of PETAR, was exploited by mining in the past.) Since the concession process provides for the use and exploitation of the territory, this raises the suspicion that mining activities may return in certain parts of the territory, including inside PETAR. After all, as the women state, when it comes to these projects “everything is connected and stitched up in advance”.

In the legal sphere, this whole process has been conducted on the basis of approvals granted in the dead of night, with no participation by communities directly affected. The state government has gone as far as using documents from other meetings (minutes, photos) to claim that consultations with the community about the concession were held. Due to the pandemic, health precautions become the alibi for not holding major public consultations. What has happened in practice is that hearings are deliberately hollowed out since they are proposed in an online format or in-person but in the state capital, in a context where dwellers lack internet access and the resources to travel. According to the specs, the actions to be developed by the company that wins the concession include activities that go against the park’s Management Plan. This unmask the environmental racism involved in the privatization: if it means companies develop their business, the environmental impact studies need not be taken into account. Nevertheless, this way of conducting the concession, i.e., by disrespecting traditional communities’ right to prior, free and informed consultation (ILO Convention 169), has been understood by part of the Judiciary as valid, which has speeded up the process in spite of these irregularities.

In an even greater offensive than the state government of João Dória, in São Paulo, the federal government of Jair Bolsonaro launched on February 7, 2022, a decree for the concession/privatization of five Conservation Units. One of them, the Serra da Canastra National Park, was created during the military dictatorship and overlaps an area of 1,500 families of rural producers, including 43 communities and 550 traditional families, recognized as *Canastreiros*.

Women self-organize and resist

When nobody is being heard, least of all are the women. The spaces for participation are scarce and, moreover, tend to be set aside for just a few leaders – men, in general – who, owing to the patriarchal structure of the communities themselves, do not take women’s concerns, perceptions and arguments to the public debate. This, in addition to the disregard the State has shown towards the issue of participation, has made women unite in their own collective, from where they

organize the fight against the concession from their self-organization. As well as enhancing the resistance based on a plurality of voices, women's self-organized spaces have also been important as a form of self-care against the harassment that the State has undertaken over the course of the process, which has even caused mental illness and emotional distress among the communities.

What is evident is that the types of conservation 'without-people' that have been adopted as the model and that have for decades dictated the environmental policy of several countries, including Brazil, is very efficient for capital in the current historical period of expansion of its borders. The creation of territories without people means the creation of territories without resistance, where privatizing projects – as in the case of PETAR's concession – can develop unfettered. We believe that the struggle against the concession in this case will be victorious because the communities of Iporanga have never accepted the fact that their own territory is not their property. Over time, given that the imposition of the park was a reality that could not be changed, they gradually became more and more its owners, appropriating means to live and create within that environment. However, they have always exposed what they see as wrong and fought over the still latent conflicts, like the absence of deeds to their land.

It is not by chance that the State's concession plan provides for the closing of one of the park's entrances via Iporanga municipality, even though this entrance greatly facilitates visits to one of the park's top caves. It is an attempt to exclude the most resistant communities, making it no longer viable for them to access the park or work as environmental monitors. This reminds us that the history of the Ribeira River Valley has been the history of the erasure of the paths trodden by traditional communities, and the construction of paths that privilege the flow of capital. Federal highway BR-116 – a major highway that cuts in half many of the Ribeira River Valley's municipalities and is responsible for much of the cargo haulage in Southeast Brazil – is an icon of this.

What we know is that the old paths never actually cease to be used, and that the elderly are especially concerned about reminding the young about where these paths pass, where they are and where they end up. The privatization project intends to uproot communities from their territory based on a re-architecture of such paths, but it is failing to take into account the capacity of resistance and inventiveness of the peoples that laid them.

Natália Lobo and **Miriam Nobre** – *Sempreviva Organização Feminista*, World March of Women – Brazil

Jéssica Cristina Pires – *Caiçara, quilombola*, agroecology technician, representative of communities from Iporanga, PETAR Women's Collective, Petar Without Concession Movement;

Paula Daniel Fogaça – Biologist; holds a master's degree in Sustainability.

(1) In order to support the struggle organized by women against the privatization of PETAR and follow this movement, please access <https://www.petarsemconcessao.minhasampa.org.br/> and sign the online petition.

(2) The Ribeira River Valley harbors a variety of traditional communities and peoples, like the Guarani Mbyá and Guarani Nandeva indigenous peoples, and *quilombola*, *caiçara* and *caboclo* communities.

(3) The Rural Environmental Registry (CAR) is a tool created by Brazil's new forestry code. It is a geo-referenced digital registry of the country's rural territory. This instrument, which ought to guide the implementation of environmental policies, has been used and a

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document that justifies what has been termed digital land-grabbing in many countries of the Global South. To find out more, check: <https://grain.org/en/article/6650-infograficos-cercas-digitais-a-grilagem-tecnologica-da-terra>

(4) For more information on the history of Bairro da Serra and relations between Iporanga's traditional communities and PETAR, see "Florestas e lutas por reconhecimento: território, identidades e direitos na Mata Atlântica brasileira" by Pedro Castelo Branco Silveira. Available at: <https://revistas.ufpr.br/campos/article/view/26092/17361>

The Concession Model in Southeast Asia: Coming Full Circle?

Colonial and anti-colonial movements' have deeply shaped the patterns and impacts of concessions in SE Asia. In some cases, communities have experienced dispossession through land grabs dressed as concessions. In others, concessions are part of a re-concentration of land holding. Either way, the concession model fits well with ideologies of modernisation.

A plantation is a machine that assembles land, labor, and capital in huge quantities to produce monocrops for a world market. It is intrinsically colonial, based on the assumption that the people on the spot are incapable of efficient production. It takes life under control: space, time, flora, fauna, water, chemicals, people. It is owned by a corporation and run by managers along bureaucratic lines.

Tania Li, *Plantation Life*, Duke University Press 2021

Land struggles played an important part in mid-twentieth century anti-colonial movements in Southeast Asia. In some cases, for example in northern Vietnam, the targets were mainly local landlords who benefited from their association with the colonial regime. These landlords had holdings measured in a few hectares at most. Elsewhere, however, it was the much larger French (Indochina), Dutch (Indonesia), British (Burma and Malaysia) and American (Philippines) plantation owners whose holdings became a target of the independence push and whose association with gross inequality pushed independence movements leftwards.

Given this history, there are clear ironies in the revitalisation of the concession model in the twenty-first century, particularly as countries with a history of socialist land reforms seem to have applied the model with particular enthusiasm. Small scale cultivators in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam have all seen experienced dispossession through land grabs dressed as concessions. In countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, which enacted pre-emptive redistributive reforms to offset rural unrest, concessions are part of a re-concentration of land holding. This raises questions both on the reasons for the large-scale landholding model coming back in this form and on the impacts on smallholders and on the region's forests.

Essentially, the concession model involves a government agency granting a commercial enterprise the right to large-scale resource extraction and/or land use for perennial or annual crops, usually in the form of a long-term lease. Concessions include not only agricultural plantations, but also other activities like forestry (logging and fast growing tree plantations), mining, quarrying, hydropower, tourism and industrial development – the latter often in so-called special economic zones that have labour and environmental laws different to those of the rest of the country in which they are located. Many – but far from all – of the concessions in Southeast Asia are to companies from neighbouring countries. In mainland Southeast Asia, the governments of the less

industrialised countries of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar have mainly entered into concession agreements with companies from China, Thailand and Vietnam. Singaporean and Malaysian companies invest in Indonesian oil palm.

The social and environmental consequences of the concession model are manifold. The land that is granted for monoculture plantations is often part of extensive cultivation systems in upland margins, on land that used to be farmed under shifting cultivation by ethnic minorities. Fallow land within such systems gets classified as 'wastelands' by state authorities. Concessions are also implicated in widespread deforestation, in a region that has experienced more rapid forest loss or degradation than any other part of the world.

There is a close link between forest concessions and land concessions. In Thailand, until 1989 large parts of the country's forested land outside national parks and wildlife sanctuaries were granted as logging concessions. Concern over environmental and human impacts of logging led in that year to the cancellation of these concessions, many of which had opened up forest areas for road infrastructure and brought in labour that resulted in smallholder clearance of areas that had been logged over. Following cancellation of the logging concessions, the Royal Forest Department granted large-scale investors' concessions for the plantation of tree crops, including eucalyptus and rubber, in the name of reforestation. The World Bank's controversial Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP) of the late 1980s was implicated in such concession policy. The result was years of conflict between such plantations and the mainly poor smallholders whose untitled land was confiscated, some of whom had no option but to go on to clear yet more land for their survival. These included ethnic Lao and Khmer in northeastern Thailand and indigenous upland groups such as the Karen in the North. In Cambodia, cancellation of logging concessions in the 1990s was followed by granting of economic land concessions, which in principle would be used to grow commercial crops. In fact, large swathes of land were deforested to create such farms but were never planted, since the main profit to be made was in timber rather than in plantation crops on what was often quite marginal land. A similar process has occurred in Kalimantan, Indonesia.

In Cambodia, which has lost more than a quarter of its forests since 2000, studies suggest that a combination of forest and economic land concessions account for 30 per cent of deforestation over the same period. Moreover, another significant part is clearance made by those who have been displaced by the concentration of land in the hands of bigger economic players. In Ratanakiri province, in the country's northeast, the once forested landscape has been fundamentally transformed over just two decades, as indigenous lands have been lost to concessionaires growing tree crops such as rubber and cashew. Many landless ethnic Khmer have moved from the lowlands to grow plantation crops on smallholdings that have been carved out of areas that were previously forested or were part of fallow cycles of indigenous shifting cultivators.

Why have governments in this region that had come to power in part on the basis of land grievances against former regimes been so willing and able to employ the concession model and to dispossess their own citizens? To answer this question requires that we look at legacies of socialist systems, developmental ideology, political-economic structures and transnational investment patterns.

As countries which historically applied socialist models and principles of land tenure have moved toward market-based production, they have maintained state control over large parts of national territories. Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia all experimented with a combination of collectivisation and state-run agriculture, silviculture and logging. In the 1980s, market-oriented reforms ultimately led back to smallholder agriculture, but large areas were reserved under state management. This has facilitated the granting of long-term leases to domestic or foreign investors for tracts of land measured in thousands of hectares. In Myanmar, socialist organisation of agriculture was mainly implemented through state procurement policies rather than direct state or collective control, but within this system farmers were told which crops to plant and required to deliver at below-market prices. As the country opened up economically from the 1990s, the military joined wealthy individuals in what are often termed crony-led land grabs, based on continuing state ownership of land under the country's constitution and applying the concession model.

The political economy of each country shapes the pathways and patterns of concessions. In Cambodia, political power has been achieved and entrenched by the ruling party through patronage, in which concessions for the country's forest and land resources has been prominent. Many of the concessions are thus held by powerful domestic players, but Vietnamese, Thai and Chinese investors have also been granted large scale concessions for sugar, rubber and other crops, as well as for tourism and industrial activity.

The concession model fits well with ideologies of modernisation, particularly in the globalized neoliberal era in which policies such as the Lao government's "turning land into capital" are supposed to catalyse a move from "backward" to modern agricultural practices. Underlying such ideology, however, lie many highly questionable assumptions, including the relative efficiency of larger holdings compared to smallholder plantation of the same crops, of the trickle down that profitable investor-led farming is supposed to bring to rural well-being, and the restoration of supposedly degraded lands through the concession model. What is not in doubt is that the model serves the interests both of corporate investors and government officials involved in the granting of concessions. This has occurred not only at the expense of Southeast Asia's remaining forest cover, but also of the region's smallholders whose displacement and other livelihood ruptures will have lasting impacts.

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Conservation Concessions as Neo-Colonization: The African Parks Network

The conservation industry is now promoting the idea of 'buying up' Conservation Concessions and reconstituting them as business models with profit-seeking aims. A case in point is the 'African Parks Network', which manages 19 National Parks and Protected Areas in 11 countries in Africa.

Concessions for so-called conservation purposes (national parks, protected areas, nature reserves, etc.) have their roots in the ideas and beliefs that underpinned European colonisation. The concept of Protected Areas originated in the United States in the late 1800s, founded on the desire to preserve 'intact' areas of 'wilderness' without human presence, mainly for elite hunting and the enjoyment of scenic beauty. Both Yellowstone and Yosemite national parks were forcibly emptied of their inhabitants and provided the blueprint for 'doing conservation' that continues to the present day. During that same period, European colonisers declared large tracts of the occupied territories in Africa as 'game reserves' after forcibly displacing populations from said areas. These reserves were often created after colonialist hunters had already exterminated much of the wildlife population, in an effort to restore such populations so that they could continue 'big game hunting.'

However, the withdrawal of European colonisers from Africa did not bring about a return to customary land tenure. Newly formed States often continued the land use and conservation policies of the colonisers, which demonstrates how deep colonial norms and knowledge systems had become institutionalised. Colonisation processes have always been accompanied by the idea that 'nature' is separate from humans, and that 'civilisation' is better than the unpredictable and unproductive 'wilderness'. The idea of creating areas of 'nature without humans' is thus rooted in the racist and colonial thinking that only white 'civilised' men were able to protect and manage this 'nature'. They and only they could enter this otherwise 'human-free' 'nature'.

And we can observe that in many places, this idea persists even today. Safari tourism, for example, is simply a continuation of this tradition. Wealthy (predominantly white) tourists are paying large sums of money to stay in luxury hotels and receive permission to shoot animals (with guns or cameras) as trophies. Meanwhile, those populations that hunt for subsistence inside their territories-turned-park are labelled as poachers and criminalised. Such tourism relies on certain constructions of what 'Africa' means to those undertaking the safaris, which reveal the colonial mindset that created these reserves in the first place. That is why protected areas are mostly 'people-free' landscapes. People are rarely portrayed as an intrinsic part of nature, and if they are, they are depicted either as intruders or 'poachers', or as touristic landscapes for buying handcrafts or watching dances, or as guides or eco-guards working for a foreign company or NGO.

Most international conservation NGOs have facilitated this depiction of Indigenous Peoples as invaders in their own territories. This narrative has conveniently placed their focus on fighting

against people using the forest for their own subsistence, instead of on the consumption patterns and economic interests of the supporters and funders of said NGOs.

The Serengeti National Park in Tanzania, for example, is arguably the best-known symbol of 'Africa's wild nature'. Yet, there is hardly any mention in the Park's tourist propaganda on how the Serengeti was created: by evicting the Indigenous Maasai during colonial times from their ancestral territories. And this situation continues today. (1)

Mordecai Ogada, co-author of the book 'The Big Conservation Lie', explains in a 2021 interview that the geographical spaces of Protected Areas frequently work as colonies, with the difference that they are no longer under the management of an empire but of a network of elites with clear economic and political interests. (2) Those, he explains, are the colonisers with respect to conservation concessions. They enter such agreements with large sums of money and frequently influence any national policy that might impact their interests and managed areas. The power of these networks of colonisers is both physical –enforcing their rule and dominance on the ground– and political –having allies in the right places administering key governmental offices and funding positions, Ogada explained. On top of this, possible conflicts that may arise are easily brushed aside as not their responsibility; this is done by placing the burden on the 'sovereign condition' of national governments. These networks answer to donors, the tourist industry and tourists themselves, which are all mainly based in the global North. And they endure on the basis of images of peaceful landscapes, which in their imaginations are landscapes without people.

These networks also involve powerful business people with vested interests in financing conservation for offsetting their emissions or greenwashing their dirty and destructive activities. Recent examples include the internet retailer Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos and his ten-billion-dollar 'Earth Fund', with some of the biggest conservation NGOs receiving \$100 million each in a first round of payments (3), and Swiss billionaire businessman Hansjörg Wyss's donations to the so-called '30x30' scheme (4), which aims for 30 per cent of the planet to be turned into Protected Areas by 2030.

Nowadays, the conservation industry is promoting the idea of 'buying up' conservation concessions (Protected Areas or Parks) and reconstituting them as business models with profit-seeking aims. A case in point is the 'African Parks Network' (APN), which manages 19 National Parks and Protected Areas in 11 countries in Africa.

The African Parks Network: Outsourcing Protected Areas to Private Companies

The 'African Parks Network' (APN) was founded by billionaire Dutch tycoon Paul Fentener van Vlissingen in the year 2000. Its founding name was the African Parks Foundation. Fentener comes from one of the Netherlands' richest industrial dynasties and was CEO of the energy conglomerate SHV Holdings, which undertook business with the apartheid regime in South Africa. He allegedly had the idea for creating 'African Parks' after a dinner hosted by Nelson Mandela in the presence of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, at which the future of national parks in South Africa was discussed. For the billionaire, it was the perfect opportunity to restore his image, tainted by his

activities during the apartheid regime. Initially created as a commercial company, 'African Parks' swapped this status for that of an NGO in 2005, in order to more easily attract donors and conservation funding. (5)

APN's business model is based on a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) strategy for the management of Protected Areas, whereby APN maintains the full responsibility and execution of all management functions and is accountable to the government. APN employs a market approach to wildlife conservation, arguing that wildlife can pay for its conservation if 'well managed'. It presents itself as an "African solution for Africa's conservation challenges". (6) However, behind the façade of APN is a large group of northern and southern governments, multilateral institutions, international conservation organisations, millionaire family foundations and individuals that fund its conservation business.

Since 2017, the president of the company is Prince Henry of Wales, otherwise known as Prince Harry, a member of the British royal family, who has helped in the acquisition of funding and partners.

APN controls a total area of 14.7 million hectares in Africa, about half the size of Italy, and it intends to expand even more in order to manage "30 parks by 2030 across 11 biomes, ensuring that 30 million hectares are well managed, thus contributing to the broader vision of having 30% of Africa's unique landscapes protected in perpetuity". Moreover, their roadmap to 2030 states that "10 more protected areas spanning a further five million hectares will be managed by select partners through our newly created 'Incubator Programme'. These objectives are ambitious and will contribute significantly to the global target of protecting 30% of the Earth to keep the planet flourishing". (7)

The Network also indicates its interest in selling carbon credits as an additional source of income. Although such credits basically facilitate more pollution and fossil fuel burning, the website of APN claims that its conservation model "represents an integrated nature-based solution to climate change (...). We secure the carbon captured in the plants and soil in places of high biodiversity value". (8)

However, experiences on the ground reveal how this so-called Public-Private 'partnership' is in fact reinforcing and recreating oppressive power relations.

A 2016 academic study on **the Majete Wildlife Reserve in Malawi** is a case in point. (9) The reserve has been managed by APN since 2003, with a 25 year management concession. It was the first park to fall under APN's administration. According to the concession they were granted, APN is supposed to involve community members in the management of the reserve. This includes consulting them in issues requiring critical decisions such as bringing new animals into the area, and allowing said members to access and use some of the resources in the reserve such as grass, fish and reeds.

While there is a formal and legal partnership between the Malawian government and APN on the sharing of proceeds, there is no formal or clear agreement between local communities and APN on how benefits are going to be shared out. The benefits for the communities are only indirect, by engaging in activities such as selling food and performing dances for a tourist public. APN argues that apart from physically accessing the resources from the game reserve, communities will benefit from wildlife conservation through employment, income-generating activities they are engaged in and via APN's corporate responsibility initiatives. However, according to the research, communities are rarely allowed to fish, or to harvest honey or reeds in the game reserve. Instead, they are allowed to harvest only grass at specific times of the year, with the Park management putting forth the argument that communities are supposed to protect and conserve these areas, and that such harvesting disturbs the animals.

One woman interviewed for the research was reported as saying “we have lost control over our means of livelihood, but cannot also get employed by APN; we are prevented from accessing resources that we need for our daily subsistence life such as fish, mushrooms and honey.”

The same research also underlines how APN deceptively used local people to achieve its own goals, but in such a way as to be of no benefit to the community as a whole. For example, APN used a vague agreement with local chiefs (who were taken to other national parks for a tour) as justification to enforce an extension of the wildlife reserve to ancestral land that was being farmed by the communities. This left community members not only voiceless but also divided. This situation has been worsened even more by APN's tactic to coerce families, and women in particular, by offering to cover their children's school fees.

Interviews with local chiefs and leaders of community organisations also revealed that though they are informed about the new developments inside the reserve, they do not have any powers to object to APN's management decisions. Consequently, they are forced to align themselves with the APN management for fear of jeopardising their relationship with the organisation.

The Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of Congo is another case that merits being highlighted. The Park, created in 1935 when the country was a French colony, appropriated the biggest forest area in the region with 1.35 million hectares. Since 2010, the management of this “nirvana for nature lovers”, as APN describes it, has been placed entirely in APN's hands for a period of 25 years. The partners of the Park include groups such as WWF and the European Union.

APN partnered with the Congo Conservation Company (CCC), an enterprise created and funded by a German philanthropist, in order to undertake tourist business activities in the Odzala-Kokoua National Park. This includes three high-end lodges, which tourists can access by flying in on charter flights from the Congolese capital Brazzaville. However, very few inhabitants of Brazzaville have the possibility to enjoy such luxury tourism. A 4-day Odzala Gorilla Discovery Camp visit, for example, costs US\$ 9,690 dollars per person.

While the Park was founded in 1935, APN states that “humans have occupied the area for 50,000 years”. The company notes that 12,000 people still live around the Park, “yet it is still one of the

most biologically diverse and species-rich areas on the planet” (emphasis added). With this formulation, rather than recognising the inhabitants’ contribution towards keeping the forest standing after all these thousands of years, the company makes it clear that in its view, the presence of people is not compatible with the aim of conserving forests; it is *despite* the communities’ presence that there is still some remaining biodiversity. (10)

APN claims to protect the Park “with an enhanced eco-guard team and other law enforcement techniques”, besides investing in “changing human behaviour”. These claims and views on conservation make clear that for this Network and its funders and allies, people living in and around forests are considered a threat and that their conservation business can be run better without them.

In fact, according to a study about the historical relationship between communities and the Park’s management, an estimated 10,000 people were evicted following the Park’s creation in 1935, and have never been compensated for their loss. The study also points out that in spite of the more recent policy of APN that suggests ‘participation’ and ‘representation’ of communities in decision-making processes, the general feeling among the communities interviewed is that the Park has been set up not only by foreigners but also for foreigners. Some community members said: “We don’t want this park that gives us nothing and diminishes our livelihoods; it deprives us from our rights over the forest. Our rights to access resources and lands are very weakly respected”. Another person said: “Our game is seized by eco-guards. There is more misery and poverty, because not only are we unable to feed ourselves well, we also cannot sell a bit of game to buy basic products such as soap and petrol”. (11)

It should be no surprise that for more than 10 years, APN has shown an interest in exploring if the Odzala-Kokoua Park could be turned into a REDD+ project, because through the lens of such projects, communities are also considered a threat and blamed for deforestation. (12) Furthermore, there are no provisions for communities to receive a share of the profits from the sale of carbon credits.

For the WWF, people and not mining companies are threatening the forests

The Odzala-Kokoua National Park is not the only park in the region. It is part of what WWF calls the ‘Tridom Landscape’, an area covering 10 per cent of the whole Congo Basin rainforest, which includes another two Parks: the Dja Faunal Reserve in Cameroon and the Minkébé National Park in Gabon. But several large-scale projects are planned inside the ‘Tridom Landscape’, in particular an area of 150,000 hectares for iron ore mining concessions in the Cameroon-Congo border region. Due to the inaccessibility of said region, huge infrastructure investments must also be planned, such as roads, a railway to transport the minerals, and a hydro-dam for supplying the necessary electricity. The latter is called the Chollet Dam, named after a stretch of waterfalls on the Dja river, described by WWF itself as “a pristine site”. (13)

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WWF has been practicing and conniving with persecution and eviction of Indigenous Peoples and other communities in the region in the name of ‘protecting’ nature. Yet, no similar measures have been announced by the NGO against the companies promoting mining, large-scale infrastructures and hydroelectric dams in this same area. The explanation can be found in a recent (rejected) project proposal that WWF presented to the EU to create yet another Protected Area, the Messok Dja Park.

In this proposal, WWF argues that it expects the mining companies to fund WWF in its ‘protection measures’ in the Triodom area. In other words, the new Park could be seen as an offset for the damage done by mining and its related infrastructure. On top of this, eco-guards supported by WWF have been involved in severe human rights violations, including beatings, torture, sexual abuse and even the killing of members of indigenous communities who live in Messok Dja, the new Park that is being proposed. (14)

The tremendous contradiction of persecuting those who have lived with and conserved forests while remaining silent about the mining companies’ plans, reveals the real interests of current ‘conservation’ policies, namely, the continuation of an overall destructive model based on the ideas and beliefs of colonisation processes and the colonisers, old and new. Solidarity with the communities that resist and face the impacts of ‘fortress conservation’ is imperative. Enterprises such as APN represent and reinforce these ‘fortress conservation’ beliefs and policies.

WRM International Secretariat

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RECOMMENDED

“Colonial history and the environmental crisis are closely linked”

The book, *Une écologie décoloniale* (a decolonial ecology), written by Malcom Ferdinand—who was born and raised in Martinique, an island in the Caribbean Sea with the status of a region and overseas department of France—presents an analysis of how we cannot understand the current environmental crisis without knowing colonial history. His book explores how slavery was not only a system that violently monopolized black bodies, but also participated in a violent way of inhabiting the earth—inhabiting it in a colonial fashion, in particular through plantations and monocultures for export. The author says, however, that this colonial way of life was not abandoned with the abolition of slavery. On the contrary, in several countries, its abolition was “granted” on the condition of being able to continue with this colonial way of inhabiting the earth. The author concludes that “if it is possible to recognize the environmental damage of the past, then it is equally important to recognize colonial crimes of that same past and their effects that extend to the present.” Read an interview on the Political Ecology portal in Spanish here:

<https://www.ecologiapolitica.info/?p=14593>

Jari Cellulose Group land titles in Brazil declared illegal

A Public Civil Action from the Prosecutor of Agrarian Justice in the state of Pará, Brazil, against the Jari Cellulose Group requested that part of their land titles be annulled. The Civil Action came out of an investigation of successive fraudulent and illegal practices since 1937, related to the issuance of land titles and to fraud in public records for an area of about 126,000 hectares in the municipality of Almeirim. The Jari Cellulose Group is involved in logging businesses, and it has REDD+ carbon credit projects for sale. See more information about this company in [this article from the WRM bulletin](#); and read an article in Portuguese about the Civil Action here:

<https://www2.amphibrach/noticias/acao-requer-cancelamento-de-registros-imobiliarios-realizados-pela-jari-celulose.htm>

At the forefront: Histories of African women’s resistance

The International Labour Research and Information Group has produced a beautifully illustrated and inspiring calendar for 2022. Each month portrays one story of women's leadership and participation in radical organizing against oppression in Africa. The selected histories in this calendar, representative of a much broader history of women’s resistance on the continent, reject conceptualisations of African women as submissive. These stories show that African women have a rich history of resistance, have played important roles and have developed innovative tactics in building, defending, and advancing emancipatory struggles. Organisations and movements can draw strength and inspiration from these histories. You can download the calendar in English here: <https://ilrigsa.org.za/2022-calendar/>

The collective memory of the Madja People in Brazil

With the title, ‘Ima Bote Madjacca: Madja Myths,’ anthropologist Rosenilda Nunes Padilha (Rose) has launched a book of the myths of the Madja people (also known as the Kulina). The entire book was written in Madja and Portuguese. To write the book, Rose had the participation of the Madjá

themselves: Zuaó Kulina, Jacinami Kulina, Macari Kulina, Dsomo Kulina; as well as the contribution of Walter Sass, a missionary anthropologist who lived with the Madja for several years. "It was necessary to do something that affected the collective memory of the people," the author said. The book was published by Cimi – The Indigenous Missionary Council, Western Amazon Region. Read an interview about the book in Portuguese here:

https://port.pravda.ru/cplp/54004-povo_indigena/

Total announces further land grabs to offset its emissions

An article from Mongabay news portal alerted the announcement of French oil giant Total Energies for developing a 40,000 hectare monoculture plantation in the savannahs of the Republic of Congo to offset its emissions. The project, which will plant non-native acacia trees, will be managed by its own Nature Based Solutions Unit. Total, in partnership with the French timber consultancy Forêt Ressources Management (FRM), aims to also produce timber from the industrial plantation in order to generate further profits. Several indigenous and peasant communities are to be affected by the project. While setting up this massive offset tree plantation project, Total is also engaged in exploring oil extraction in two blocks in the north of the country's rainforests. At the same time, Total is expanding its liquified gas extraction projects all around the world. Read the article in English here: <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/01/at-a-plantation-in-central-africa-big-oil-tries-to-go-net-zero/>

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