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Introduction

In 1841, a Liberian colonist delivered a piece of advice to African Americans contemplating a new start in the fledgling West African state: plant oil palms. Besides being “the most beautiful” trees, their fruit yielded an oil that was “altogether preferred by the colonists to lard.” The young stem of the palm could be eaten as a vegetable, and one could tap “a very pleasant wine” from older trees. Featured prominently on Liberia’s official seal, the oil palm seemed to be a living symbol of Africa’s tropical bounty. One writer predicted that palm oil would soon be “one of the heaviest articles of traffic in the commercial world.”¹

Palm oil has indeed become one of the world’s most important agricultural commodities. Extracted from the flesh of the oil palm’s fruit, palm oil is the most widely consumed fat on the planet. It’s in cooking oil, peanut butter, cookies and crackers, soaps, cosmetics, plastics, and biodiesel. Palm kernel oil, extracted from the nut at the center of the fruit, serves in nearly as many roles. What the prognosticators of the 1840s got wrong was where and how this would happen. Farmers and settlers across western Africa launched palm oil as a global commodity in the nineteenth century. Yet today, the vast majority of the world’s palm oil comes from Southeast Asia. Africa now imports ten times more palm oil than it exports.

This book traces the history of that remarkable reversal, following the oil palm’s journeys out of Africa and the development of palm oil as a commodity. Not a natural history of *Elaeis guineensis* (the Linnaean name for the oil palm), this is rather the story of how humans used and lived with oil palms—a history that has been anything but natural.² Humans shaped where and how oil palms were cultivated and what ends they served. The dominant role of palm oil in today’s food system owes something to the plant’s innate biology but much more to political and economic power. The people who grew and harvested oil palms, rather the tree itself, are what made palm oil cheap and plentiful on the world market. Historically, many of the people doing that labor weren’t free to choose how they worked with this plant. Elites, states, and corporations shaped systems of production, making and remaking oil palm landscapes to suit their interests. It’s a story shot through with the stark realities of power and injustice, of slavery, colonialism, and violence. Yet it’s also a story of opportunity: of farmers taking up oil palm on their own initiative or joining pioneering settlements, seeing the promise of a better life in neat rows of palms.

Consumers were important in the oil palm story, too. Like most commodities, palm oil became part of an expansive commodity “web,” connecting individual producers, consumers, and middlemen.³ Decisions made in a nineteenth-century British candle factory could reverberate through palm groves in Nigeria, making or breaking the fortunes of oil producers. The reverse wasn’t always true: chemical technologies allowed manufacturers to transform and interchange palm oil with other fats, weakening the market power of oil palm farmers. Cheapness, versatility, and invisibility to consumers ultimately became palm oil’s main selling points.

This book isn’t encyclopedic. I’ve left some historic uses for palm oil unexplored (ski wax, to take one example). I haven’t discussed some of the places where palm oil was historically produced and traded (Lusophone Africa is conspicuously absent). In an effort to tell a global story, I have resorted to broad labels like “Africans” and “Europeans” that

run the risk of overgeneralizing. The stories I've assembled here highlight the biggest groups of producers and consumers of palm oil in the past, and I include particular cases that highlight key trends—or exceptions to them.

I tell most of this story through written archives: letters, travelogues and memoirs; records left by corporations; and memos and reports filed away in government archives. These are the documents that survived time, bankruptcies and acquisitions, decolonization, and the whims of record keepers. The people who are at the core of this story—farmers and workers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—left relatively few written records. When they do appear in the archives, their voices are often filtered through European observers complaining about their behavior. Wherever possible, I've supplemented archival sources with oral histories, ethnographies, and journalistic accounts recorded across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The endnotes show my deep debt to the researchers who wrote down—and are still recording—the stories and experiences of people living with oil palms.

The Story Ahead

Part I: Africa and the Atlantic World

The book begins with an introduction to the oil palm tree and its deep history in Africa. Beyond getting the reader acquainted with *E. guineensis* as a physical thing, chapter 1 highlights the role of humans in *making* oil palm landscapes. Humans helped bring the oil palm out of a marginal existence in swamps and forest edges. Together, they colonized grassland and forest regions across western Africa. Wherever there were oil palms, there were humans. And oil palms provided much more than oil, offering wine, medicine, fuel, timber and thatching, and fiber. Contrary to what you'll read in most accounts, palm oil wasn't traded across vast distances in antiquity, winding up in Egyptian tombs. Bad science and Eurocentric thinking created a false past for the oil palm, disregarding the ways Africans used oil palms on their own terms.

Europe's "discovery" of the oil palm in the fifteenth century launches chapter 2. Though European ships carried palm oil from port to port in western Africa and brought some to Europe, that trade was soon eclipsed by the traffic in captives across the Atlantic. Palm oil sustained and lubricated the Atlantic slave trade, and enslaved Africans used their knowledge of oil palms to survive and resist slavery in the Americas. Oil palms traveled, too, taking root in a new continent. Meanwhile, Europeans appropriated African knowledge about the medicinal uses of palm oil for their own benefit. By the seventeenth century, palm oil was a commonly available drug in England, and by the late eighteenth century, it was beginning to find new roles in soap and other substances.

That new demand supported a growing trade in palm oil, which in many textbook accounts neatly replaced the slave trade. The story isn't entirely wrong: as European powers moved to abolish the Atlantic slave trade, palm oil did become an important export commodity from Africa. Chapter 3 makes a case that the transition was more complicated than often imagined. The core institutions of the slave trade—and slavery itself—adapted to the palm oil trade. Enslaved Africans made much of the palm oil that Europeans celebrated as a "legitimate" product. Large plantations, new tools, and a new product appearing around 1840, inedible "hard" palm oil, showed how Africans living under diverse political and environmental conditions could produce commodities for sale to the world. The fortunes of Africa's palm oil exporters changed dramatically at the end of the century, however. Egged on by missionaries and merchants, Britain seized more and more territory along the African coast, helping to spark the "scramble for Africa" in the 1880s. Palm oil was hardly the main reason for the "scramble," but its particular significance to Britain helps explain why that country, rather than France or Germany, wound up controlling the heart of the oil palm belt.

What did the British want with palm oil? Chapter 4 traces the growing importance of palm oil in Britain and the industrializing world more broadly. First used to add color to soap, palm oil became a staple ingredient in soap and candles during the Industrial Revolution. New technologies to refine and modify fats made palm oil more versatile, replacing fats harvested from terrestrial and marine animals. Canny marketers built on the idea that palm oil was a “legitimate product,” suggesting that buying a candle could “snuff out” slavery. And events entirely unrelated to Africa’s palm groves had great significance for palm oil producers: war in Russia, cowboys raising cattle on the Pampas of South America, whalers prowling the Pacific, and drillers striking petroleum in Pennsylvania all pushed world demand for palm oil up and down. By the 1850s, palm kernels joined palm oil in the manufacturer’s arsenal of fatty materials. Chemists tinkering with palm oil and kernels found new ways to strip out the color, taste, and smells that Europeans now found unappealing. As soon as they could, manufacturers slipped palm fats into margarine and other food products—illicitly at first, but later boldly advertising them as superior, plant-based foods that would replace unhygienic lard and butter.

Part II: Oil Palms and Empire

For European soap and margarine manufacturers hard-pressed to find raw materials, the “scramble for Africa” came just in time. Chapter 5 recounts their attempts to capture what many believed were Africa’s vast, untapped palm groves. Their goal was to transform palm oil from a handmade thing found in a dazzling array of colors, odors, and qualities into a single, edible commodity. The commodity form abhors context and nuance, but as Europeans discovered, context was everything. Palm oil meant different things in different places, and Africans weren’t enthusiastic about selling their palms or their labor to Europeans. At times, imperial governments took land and labor at gunpoint so that Europeans could enjoy cheap margarine on toast. Yet a string of dismal failures with mechanized production eventually forced Europeans to acknowledge the importance of people in the ecology and economics of the oil palm. By the 1930s, it had become clear that machines *could* make good palm oil, but it was just as clear that Africans would only feed those machines under crushing political and economic pressure. Anywhere they had a choice, Africans continued making oil by hand or found new lines of work.

The failure of industrialists in Africa didn’t mean the failure of Africa’s palm oil industry, however. Chapter 6 shows how “traditional” methods, aided by simple machines and new infrastructure, produced huge quantities of oil and kernels for the world market. British and French officials came to sympathize with these “smallholder” producers, seeing them as viable competitors to steam-powered oil mills and plantations. Colonizers offered new tools and new palm varieties to boost output, but they also imposed harsh taxes and strict regulations to squeeze oil and kernels out of Africa. In the long run, colonial officials were forced to admit that “traditional” methods were well adapted to the conditions of western Africa.

Denied access to land and cheap labor in Africa, capitalists turned halfway around the world to Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula to create the first major oil palm plantations. Chapter 7 shows how they built on the earlier success of the rubber industry in Southeast Asia, clearing tropical forests with unfree “coolie” labor to make oil palm monocultures. These plantations were undoubtedly efficient, turning out top-quality oil from their factories. Yet the planters found that oil palms were no different than any other crop in monoculture, and they were soon battling nutritional deficiencies and diseases that rarely appeared in Africa. By 1939, Sumatra had overtaken Nigeria as the world’s largest exporter of palm oil, but the future of the plantation sector was far from certain.

The Second World War shattered the colonial structures that had provided plantations with cheap land and labor. As chapter 8 shows, imperial governments redoubled their efforts to extract palm oil and kernels from their colonies after the

war, while nationalist politicians saw the value of palm exports in financing their own dreams for development. New models emerged at places like Kulai in southern Malaysia, where the “Nucleus Estate-Smallholder” (NES) model sought to meld the efficiencies of the plantation system with the social virtues of smallholder ownership. Newly independent African states also embraced oil palm experiments, but civil war wrecked the industries of Africa’s leading producers, Nigeria and Congo. Backed by state subsidies and loans from the World Bank and other organizations, Malaysia (and later, Indonesia) shot ahead, becoming the world’s dominant palm oil producers.

Part III: Expanding the Oil Palm Frontier

The last section of the book follows the oil palm’s career through the end of empire and the Cold War, concluding with the “neoliberal turn” of the 1990s. Chapter 9 returns to the consumer’s side of the story, showing how a practically unlimited market for palm oil emerged in food and chemical industries. Whether used whole or broken up into its molecular constituents and reassembled into new chemicals, palm oil appeared in everything from instant noodles to lipstick. But palm oil’s place in the world market wasn’t inevitable. America’s soybean lobby waged a fierce “oil war” against palm oil producers in the 1980s, raising the profile of an “invisible” commodity. By the end of the twentieth century, concerns over the health of the global environment brought palm oil into the biofuel business, creating a highly controversial new market. Coming on top of existing food and chemical uses, biofuel turned oil palm into the world’s premier “flex crop,” a commodity insulated from overproduction and cyclical crises because of the many different markets it serves.⁵

Chapter 10 traces the changes that this vastly expanded market for palm oil brought to the tropics. While development organizations promoted oil palm and the NES model as a means of liberating farmers from poverty, the oil palm became an instrument of oppression and a symbol of environmental catastrophe in many places. In the Philippines, a plantation manager hired paramilitaries to terrorize workers and indigenous landowners. In Indonesia, oil palm fueled violent conflicts over land in Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Irian Jaya. In Latin America, oil palm promised to revitalize ruined banana plantations, but bloody conflicts over land and labor ensued.

The final chapter, chapter 11, follows the oil palm story into the era of “neoliberal globalization” in the 1990s and 2000s. Unleashed by deregulation and liberalization, the oil palm plantation machine marched across Asia, Africa, and Latin America at unprecedented rates. The tree offers the world an amazing bounty of cheap, versatile raw materials for our food and fuel needs, but its growth has come at a significant cost to the world’s tropical forests and the people who live in them.

Conclusions

Today’s palm oil industry faces a number of contentious debates, most notably about the effects of oil palm cultivation on tropical ecosystems. As one headline recently warned, “Palm Oil Is in Everything—and It’s Destroying Southeast Asia’s Forests.”⁶ This book argues that the oil palm itself is hardly to blame. A conjunction of economic, political, cultural, and environmental factors propelled the oil palm industry into a position where it, more than any other industry, poses “the single most immediate threat to the greatest number of species” across the planet.⁷ For many consumers, the simple message is that “palm-oil products carry a curse” into our homes.⁸

Defenders of palm oil make the case that it is, first and foremost, necessary. While Europeans fret over whether they should use palm oil in biodiesel, roughly two billion people in developing countries use palm oil to meet their basic caloric needs. Wealthy consumers in Europe and North America are eating more palm oil too, thanks to regulations that forced trans fats out of the food system. Even people who never touch palm oil—and few can honestly make this claim—benefit

indirectly from the influence it has on the price of other fats we consume. The positive case for oil palm stresses the plant's high yield. It makes more fat per hectare than any other domesticated plant or animal can manage.⁹ That high yield comes from the oil palm's fantastic efficiency in converting sunlight and CO₂ to plant matter, and the tree's potential role in carbon-neutral or carbon-negative fuel cycles has attracted a great deal of interest from researchers and policymakers focused on climate change. There's also a human dimension to the oil palm story that boycott campaigns rarely address: millions of smallholders rely on palm oil for their livelihoods, though big plantations do produce a majority of the oil on the world market.

Should you use palm oil or not? Unless you prepare all of your food, soaps, and cosmetics from scratch, avoid diesel vehicles and (in a few countries) unplug from the electric grid, you don't have much of a choice. Understanding how and why the oil palm became such an important tree in the global agricultural system is the key to understanding what's happening now. We need to see that history from a broad range of perspectives—not just the triumphal tales of plantation companies selling oil and a particular narrative about oil palm development to consumers, or the dire warnings of habitat destruction offered by environmental campaigners. We also need to consider the stories of Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans who grow and use palm oil in many different ways. Their stories, I argue, make a compelling case for supporting alternative ways of living with oil palms—not alternatives to palm oil itself.

Note on Translations and Figures

When a non-English language source is cited, the translation is my own unless otherwise noted. All figures given in this book, especially those before 1950, should be taken with a grain of salt. Even for recent periods, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) data I use varies considerably compared with data from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other organizations. Historically, palm oil was measured—often haphazardly—in casks, barrels, pipes, puncheons, hundredweights, tuns (a whale oil measure), tons (weight), gallons, and many other measures. Unless otherwise noted, assume that a ton is 2,240 pounds, and that a gallon is an *imperial* gallon, about 1.2 U.S. gallons. Historical sources reported widely-varying weights for palm oil, from 8 to 9.5 pounds per gallon. These variations reflected inaccuracies in measurement, adulterants, confusion over gallon measures, temperature variations, and changes in the chemical structure of palm oil due to different production methods. An imperial gallon of pure oil should weigh about 9.2 pounds at 25° C. I have converted some figures given in gallons to tons at the rate of 9 pounds per gallon, the most commonly-cited historic figure.¹⁰