

Ephemeral and Territorialised Oil Palm Trees



ABSTRACT

The oil palm agroindustry is advancing over many different territories worldwide, especially in Southeast Asia and South America, with impacts on forests and human and non-human communities. Production has expanded to supply refined palm oil and its derivatives, widely used in the manufacture of processed foods, cosmetics and cleaning products, as well as producing biodiesel. Because of this contemporary market demand, oil palm has become an agent of destruction, leading to critiques and denunciations from environmentalist agencies and civil movements. However, these discourses and actions seldom if ever mention the historical relationship of African and Afro-diasporic societies with the oil palm and remain silent on the colonial past responsible for transforming Central and West Africa into key territories for the production of palm oil for export markets. This is a topic already explored in historiography but so far not by anthropology to any significant degree. Based on ethnographic data, the present article analyses the historicity of the relational universe of oil palm in villages in the Mayombe forest region, showing temporalities and rhythms encompassed by a human-plant relationship. Inspired by this case study, I advance the concepts of ephemeral and territorialised plants, which could be extended to think about other ethnographic contexts.

KEYWORDS

Oil palm, palm oil, Mayombe, Central Africa, multispecies



INTRODUCTION

The oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis* jacq.) is native to West Africa, from where it spread to other parts of Central Africa. The plant has a deep historical, social, economic and cultural significance for various societies in Africa and among the African diaspora. The Mayombe Forest is recognised as one of the regions within the native range of the African oil palm, where the species maintains established natural populations (African plant database). It is an important tropical forest, sometimes called the ‘African Amazon’, which forms part of the Congo Basin, stretching from Gabon through the province of Cabinda to the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The region is home to some peoples, notably the Yoómbé, an ethnic group who speak

Kiyombe, a Kongo (Bantu) language forming part of the Kikongo Language Cluster.¹

In this article, I discuss the historicity of the relational universe of the oil palm in a Yoómbé community and territory, a group of seven villages here called MB.² I analyse how people situate themselves in time and describe their practices, oil palm trees and palm oil, focusing on stories passed down through generations, collective memories of Atlantic trade flows and the Belgian colonial period in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In the process, I highlight the different temporalities and rhythms encompassed by a specific human-plant relationship.

Sophie Chao's ethnographic work discusses the oil palm tree at a time of the violent advance of agribusiness, drastically interfering in the lives of the Upper Bian Marind people of West Papua (New Guinea). In her book, she discusses an interesting counterpoint between the different agencies of the sago palm and the oil palm. According to Chao (2022: 207), plants can participate in both 'making live' regimes – in this case, the sago – and 'making die' regimes, such as the oil palm. Among its numerous contributions, her research is highly relevant here given her reflection on the speculative activity and categorisation of the plant by her interlocutors, seen by them as a foreign agent, a victim, with whom they wish to form relations.

A few years ago, during a similar period to Chao's own field studies, I was conducting ethnographic research in the Mayombe forest, where I came across a different type of relationship with the palm tree.

1 Kiyombe is classified by Guthrie (1948) as H16, part of the western branch of Proto-Central Kongo, which originates from the Kongo Language Cluster (KLC). This group was named following an examination of 95 varieties of Bantu languages, focusing on the broader Lower Congo region (Western Central Africa), where a continuum of related languages was identified (Schryver et al. 2015). Kiyombe terms cited in this article are written in accordance with the spelling indicated in the Kiyombe-French dictionary (Grauwe 2009).

2 My Ph.D. research (Vieira 2021) comprised various phases of fieldwork between 2016 and 2019. The first phase involved research with Congolese asylum seekers living in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), while the second phase consisted of fieldwork in the province of Kongo Central (Democratic Republic of the Congo). The latter was divided into three periods (2017, 2018, 2019), totalling eleven months of research, five of which were spent mainly in the city of Matadi. For the other six months, I lived in a village in Mayombe, part of a group of seven villages (MB) situated in the Bula-Naku sector of the Tshela territory.

Oil palms and palm oil caught my attention because of their Atlantic history of human-plant co-constitution, which has ensured the maintenance of life among African and Afro-diasporic populations in the past and the present. Talking about oil palms and palm oil in West and Central Africa, or in Brazil, means touching on topics such as local cuisine, religious practices and processing techniques. They show close similarities to the practices and relationships of the sago palm in West Papua discussed by Chao, comprising a core pillar of relatedness in the community.

Unlike the sago palm, two distinct types of oil palm are found in villages where I conduct fieldwork in the Mayombe region: *yoómbe* oil palm (*dííba yoómbe*) and *phúútú* oil palm (*dííba phúútú*). The former refers to 'semi-wild' or 'spontaneous' oil palm trees, located not in plantations but in areas between the swiddens and restricted primary forest areas³. *Yoómbe* oil palms are part of an arrangement of beings (human, non-human and spirits). When associated with a plant, the category *yoómbe* indicates the involvement of humans in its ecology and a community's identification with it. People say that the oil palm is 'ours, from us, the Yoómbe'. Substances made from *yoómbe* oil palms, such as *mwuambe* (a sauce made from the palm fruits) and palm wine, are fundamental to relatedness – to making and maintaining kinship daily. At the same time, palm oil is the basis of the village economy. It is produced in machines built and operated by the inhabitants themselves, situated in the forest. The sale of 25-litre barrels of palm oil is the main way for households to earn money. These barrels also function as money (units of account, stores of value and mediums of exchange).

The transformation of this substance into money is related to the global demand for palm oil, which brings us to the second type of oil palm. The term *phúútú* is used in various Bantu languages and originally referred to the Portuguese. However, it has since become a generic term denoting everything that 'comes from outside' (foreign, white, European, Belgian), encompassing a fluid and imprecise sphere that evokes an image of Belgium, the former colonial power. The *dííba phúútú* (*phúútú* oil palm) refers to oil palms from selected seedlings planted in

- 3 Local customs prohibit any logging or hunting activities in this area of primary forest. The area is opened for communal hunting only if authorised by the ancestors following a ritual to consult them; this may take place once a year, but in some periods it may be years before it is opened.

plots during the colonial period in order to increase the supply of fruit for companies producing palm oil for export (Nicolai 2013). From the eighteenth century onwards, especially towards the end of the nineteenth century and during the first half of the twentieth century, palm oil became a global commodity, imported to supply a European market for the production of soaps and candles.⁴ Historiographical analysis has shown how palm oil trade and production were experienced differently in the African colonies. Under Belgian rule, oil palm plantations expanded significantly in the Congo (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Although palm oil was produced from small-scale harvesting, large plantation systems were introduced to enable the product to meet global demand. Much of its production had taken place in the 'Lever Circles' developed by the British entrepreneur William Lever, where the Belgian Congo Oil Plants (*Huileries du Congo Belge*: HCB) were installed and run on the basis of forced labour (Marchal 2001, Henriët 2015). The HCB did not operate in the Mayombe region, but other foreign companies did during the colonial period. The best known was the Mayombe Agricultural Cultivation Society (*Société des Cultures Agricoles du Mayombe*: SCAM), created in 1913 (Ma Pholo 1978).

The Mayombe villages were heavily impacted by colonial projects, turned into testing grounds for the palm oil agro-industry. But despite the investment, industrial production for export collapsed, while local and domestic production continued to be directed towards villages and towns in the DRC. Plots dating from the colonial period can still be found in villages today. Called *ndima léeta*, 'state plots,' these are now under the responsibility of village chiefs and are only infrequently visited by the inhabitants, as evidenced by the tall undergrowth now surrounding the palm trees.

The Mayombe region has not become a scalable landscape. First advanced by Anna Tsing (2015), this concept refers to the simplification of ecosystems through the transformation of forests and pastures into plantations based on the disciplinarisation of plants and bodies. As the author points out, though, changes brought about by scalability projects can be followed by the emergence of multiple ecological and economic

4 Jonathan E. Robins (2021) provides a long-term analysis of the oil palm, focusing on the transformation of palm oil into a global commodity. He discusses the historical and cultural relationship between Africans and this plant, encompassing the colonial experience and the expansion of agribusiness.

relationships, thriving in their ruins, what she called non-scalable landscapes. This last concept and Mayombe's history prompt various questions: what emerges in the wake of colonial projects? What remains and what is reinvented in the post-plantation era? How is the history of transforming people and palm oil into global commodities manifested in the daily life of a community?

Evidence suggests that palm oil was produced and sold in Mayombe prior to contact with Europeans. Products made from the *Elaeis guineensis* palm were marketed in Africa before the fruits, kernels and palm oil were imported into Europe. Indeed, in trade between Portuguese merchants and Africans, products made from the oil palm and the kola nut, as well as enslaved people, were commonly used forms of currency (Watkins, 2021: 61), so it was probably already part of internal trade flows. European interest in this substance has placed it on a different scale of value. This inflated valuation, in turn, has had consequences in the villages and possibly contributed to a specific arrangement whereby the products of the oil palm are subject to distinct property regimes. For example, fruits are collected from oil palms growing in the middle of the forest, near the food plots. The fruits used to make palm oil are privately owned, so people cannot harvest fruits from someone else's palm, although they can extract palm wine from palms that are not on their plot. Even if each person gathers fruit from the palms on their own land, the production of palm oil is a collective endeavour, carried out by the use of local machines situated in the forest. Men frequently lend each other jerrycans full of oil to help them pay off debts to urban traders.

To understand this specific arrangement, it is important to consider the Yoómbé people's relationship with the oil palm and palm oil over time, which brings us face to face with different temporalities and rhythms. In the first part of this article, I analyse Yoómbé tales to show how relationships with the oil palm unfold in a cyclical time of life, death and renewal. References to palm wine and the fruits of the oil palm can be identified, but we see no mention of palm oil or money. In the following two sections, I discuss the memories, accounts and explanations provided by village people regarding palm oil production techniques and the spatial traces within the village, to explore how the Mayombe oil palm became part of Atlantic trade flows and responded to the demands of production and trade for export. Finally, in the last section, I analyse the contemporary relationship of the Yoómbé with

the oil palm. At a time when palm oil production is geared towards meeting local demand in the nearest cities, other rhythms – such as the local market, the dry season and the rainy season – shape the relational configuration of the oil palm.

THE OIL PALM IN A MYTHICAL TIME

I had contact with stories told orally, some of which have also been published in small books.⁵ These are mainly known by adults and elders, since they were learnt in schools. The stories have a pedagogical character. They are resources for building and teaching Yoómbé culture and identity. Some tales suggest that relationships between people and the oil palm – or the beings and materials associated with it – are constituted through the sharing of technical knowledge and the Kiyombe language, in the course of active engagement with the land and its inhabitants (Ingold 2000: 133). This plant is situated in a mythical time, part of a cyclical relationship between life and death that is continually renewed, interconnecting men, women, oil palms and other animals. Palm wine and fruits used in cooking are present in these stories, but no mention is made of palm oil or the sale of this product.⁶ Palm oil is thus not presented as a traditional element of the Yoómbé relationship with the oil palm tree.

The story ‘The battle between the gazelle and the great leopard’ (Diocese of Boma 2010), for example, describes the palm wine tapster and the remains of the palm tree fruit:

A great battle is taking place in the Mayombe forest: the dispute between the gazelle and the great leopard. The gazelle is badly hurt and flees quickly, her blood is dripping down along the forest trail. She finds the palm wine tapster in his *lala*. The gazelle hides under a pile of *ziphusu*. The leopard is furious, he wants to find his enemy that got away. He follows the gazelle blood along the trail to kill and eat her. He too arrives at the palm wine tapster’s *lala* and meets the tapster. They both become scared when they meet. Next to them, the *ziphusu* is swinging to the rhythm of the gazelle’s breathing. The leopard says: palm wine

- 5 One of these books was published by the Diocese of Boma (2010) and introduced to me by the director of the village school.
- 6 Palm wine is a fermented drink linked to ancestors, extracted from the sap of the palm tree and widely consumed in Central and West Africa. This short story was adapted into the short film ‘The palm wine tapster’ (Vieira, 2023).

tapster, tell me where the gazelle is. Then the palm wine tapster says: the gazelle has ears, the leopard has eyes, the *ziphusu* sways, sways, the gazelle listens, the leopard sees, he sees. The leopard quickly opens his eyes wide to look for the gazelle. But he sees nothing, he finds nothing. He runs out of the *lala* to look for the gazelle somewhere else. The gazelle therefore finds life. The wine collector starts to say: gazelle, get out, go, because the leopard has no intelligence. The gazelle walks away very slowly. We have to open our ears and eyes to see the problems around us, where we live.⁷

The starting point of the story is a conflict, but the narrative revolves around the encounter with the palm wine tapster, who appears in an ambiguous position. He allows the gazelle to hide, but he also gives the leopard hints to find her. The plot is driven by the possibility of death, latent in the narrative. The contrast between the blood and the fruit remains is striking: one makes the leopard chase the gazelle, the other distracts him from his victim. The tensest moment of the conflict takes place in the palm wine *lala*, a space in the forest for resting and for storing fruit harvested from the oil palm tree. It becomes a place of refuge for the gazelle, guaranteeing its survival. The space allows the gazelle to 'find life'. In addition to death, the narrative thus turns to life, also mobilising actions inherent to the vital process: listening, seeing, breathing. It is the failure of these actions that causes the leopard to fail to achieve his goal.

When I asked what the story meant, one of my interlocutors replied: the eyes need 'to know how to see' (*kuzába móóná*). The use of the term *záába* (to know) indicates that the leopard failed to catch the gazelle because he lacked the knowledge to see. This interpretation of the tale

7 These stories were originally in Kiyombe and were translated by me with the help of a teacher from the MB school group who was giving me Kiyombe lessons. They thus went through several stages of translation – from Kiyombe to French and subsequently from French to English – which undoubtedly results in some loss of meaning in the text. In citing this and the other stories mentioned, I have written the Kiyombe terms according to the spellings presented in the book where this story was published (Diocese de Boma 2010). *Lala* is the term used to refer to spaces in the middle of the forest where the bunches of palm fruit are deposited. A small tent is often assembled nearby under which men gather and drink palm wine. It is in the *lala* that the fruit is often removed from the bunch, the remains of which are the pile of *ziphusu* – the woody remains of the bunches. It is a time-consuming task but necessary for the use of the fruit in cooking or, nowadays, also for the production of palm oil in machines. Palm wine tapsters are normally also fruit harvesters. However, the inverse is not true: there are very few palm wine tapsters, sometimes only one in a village, since it is a very tiring activity, requiring a great deal of skill.

leads us back to Ingold's formulation that ways of acting in the environment constitute ways of perceiving it (Ingold 2000: 9). They depend on skills and sensibilities developed through engagements with both human and non-human constituents of the landscape.

Some of the other stories found in the book were also told by adults in the village who had come across them as children. The central character of these tales, analysed by Julien Mbwangi (1999), is a kind of anti-hero called Nyimi. But Nyimi is not just a character in the story. He is described as a person from outside the village, who has come from Sekebanza (Central Congo) to 'provide training,' as one interlocutor put it, teaching the Yoómbé people techniques of rural activities and the correct use of the Kiyombe language. In 'Nyimi sleeps [*leki*] under the oil palm tree,' differently to the previous story, the palm wine collector is the main character, and the technique of extracting palm wine is the central theme⁸.

One day, in the morning, everyone went to make the first cut [*tenda madiba*] in the oil palm tree to extract the palm wine. After a while, in the afternoon, they made the second cut [*buela sinza*]. When evening came, they made the third cut [*buela kila*]. But when Nyimi, alone, went to get wine, he made one cut in the morning and a second in the afternoon. Then the village chief tried to advise him about the strong taste of palm wine: 'You, Nyimi, how often do you climb the palm tree to get palm wine?' Nyimi replied: 'Great chief, twice, once in the morning and once in the afternoon.' The chief listened and advised him: 'Nyimi, your [friends, relatives] will also make a cut [*babuezi lekila*] when evening comes, so that the palm wine will taste sweet. But what about you? Why don't you make the third cut on your oil palm tree?' Nyimi hears this and decides to sleep all night under his oil palm tree. At dawn, his friends go out to look for Nyimi, they see him and ask: 'Hey, you, we've been looking for you. Why did you sleep in the bush?' Nyimi says: 'The chief said that I don't make the third cut, so the palm wine gets bitter. I went to sleep [*lekila*] under the oil palm tree so the palm wine would be sweet.' Everyone listened to him and gave him advice.

The stories of Nyimi lose their meaning when translated into English since the narration plays with the multiple meanings of the same Kiyombe word. Nyimi messes up because he is a literalist: he is not guided by the dialogue with his interlocutor and does not understand the meaning of the word within its context of use. The term employed in this story to refer to the third cut made at the top of the oil palm

8 It is important to note that palm wine is made from the sap of the palm tree, which is extracted and left to ferment in a gourd or bottle suspended high up, just below the crown of leaves.

tree to extract palm wine is also refers to the term 'to sleep' (*lekila*). The chief advises Nyimi to make the third cut because it makes the palm wine taste good. But Nyimi understands the other meaning, so he sleeps under the palm tree. It is also interesting to note the shared knowledge of how palm wine is extracted and the everyday relationship of care that the palm wine tapsters have with the plant. If proper care is not taken, as in Nyimi's case, the result is a bad, bitter drink.

These stories explain how relationships between men and women, and between generations, are constituted. They are marked by accidental death arising from a breakdown in communication. But death is also linked to life and generation. Fruits are for cooking; they appear in a family register, inserted in relationships of reciprocity and mutual obligations. Mothers rely on the fruit harvested by their children. There is a cyclical dimension that renews itself but never ends. Death is not equivalent to the replacement of one generation by another, but allows for a continuous 'progenerative' process, transition points in the circulation of life (Ingold 2000: 145). In this context, death and generation are encompassed by life, not contrasted to it. As portrayed in these stories, through the oil palm, generations are 'happening' in people. And generations are also 'happening' in the oil palm itself, since it modulates in response to human action.

The association between life, death and generation also appears in how palm leaves are used when someone passes away. They may be placed on the ground, next to the body being mourned. People also take parts of the palm leaves and carry them in their hands, or tie them to their bikes or motorcycle, or on their heads. As well as communicating the fact that someone has died, the leaves also protect the wearer from the spirit of the deceased. This points to the sacred nature of the oil palm, linked to protection, which can also be observed in the centrality of these palm leaves in Afro-Brazilian religious spaces known as *terreiros*.⁹

Today, these stories are not taught in the school environment as much as they once were. Recovering them in this analysis is important, since they allow us to see a cyclical time, the relationship between life and death renewed through the oil palm. It is important to emphasise

9 Lody (1992: 17), for example, writes that the *marió* (palm leaf) is an attestation of protection and confirmation, a source for the material and symbolic life of the Orixás, Voduns and Inkices, which prevents evil from entering when placed on the doors and windows of the *terreiros*.

that none of these stories refers to palm oil or money. This absence suggests that, at the time these narratives were told, the oil palm was not primarily associated with either palm oil production or monetary value, in marked contrast to the relationship observed today.

PORTUGUESE TRADERS AND WHEN THE ANCIENTS MADE THE OIL

Signs in the landscapes of Yoómbé villages reveal contacts with the Portuguese and Belgians, as well as the region's participation in transatlantic circuits. The collective memories told orally evoke the time 'when their ancients made the oil palm' and the 'Portuguese traders' were active. These memories indicate changes in the techniques employed to make palm oil and in the units of measure employed to sell it, which elicits another temporality related to global flows.

Before Belgian colonisation and the subsequent standardisation of a mechanised technique through the use of local machines called *waksi* (uncertain spelling), there was already a practice in Mayombe of extracting the pasty liquid from the pulp of the palm fruit by placing the fruits in a hole in the ground and pounding them. These holes are still found in the forest and have been identified as spaces 'where the ancients made palm oil'. Called *zeta*, this technique resulted in a thick, concentrated oil.

The works of Susan Martin (1984, 1988) on Nigeria and Donna Maier (2009) on the Gold Coast and Togoland (southeastern Ghana and southern Togo) contain references to a technique, linked to women, that produced a 'soft oil', used for domestic consumption and local trade. The preparation of this oil resembles the procedures for making *mwambe* sauce in Mayombe villages. The fruit is placed in boiling water and then pounded in a mortar, where the fibrous pulp is separated from the stone. The technique involves female activities linked to fire, firewood, cooking and the pestle (Maier 2009: 12). Susan Martin points out that '... before the 19th century, palm oil production was seen by most farmers in southern Nigeria as part of the kitchen, a female activity. Women collected fallen fruit, which was boiled and pounded. Then they removed the kernel, washed and squeezed the fibers from the pulp' (Martin 1988: 32). This technique was time-consuming and

labour-intensive, but it guaranteed high-quality oil with a low percentage of free fat.

In addition to this technique linked to women, the authors mention another that was also used in different regions of the African Atlantic coast both before and during the colonial period. Associated with exports and linked to men, this technique depended on fermentation and did not follow boiling procedures. The end result was a 'hard oil' with a high presence of free fat, which becomes concentrated when the temperature is low.¹⁰ In 1840 in Dahomey and 1850 on the Gold Coast, the sources refer to this other method of making oil, in which the fruit was left in a heap in the open air or in fermentation holes, so that the pulp gradually separated from the fruit kernel. Water was added and the mass pounded with a mortar or was trampled down by people using their feet (Maier 2009: 12).

Similar procedures, with references to the hole and fermentation, are mentioned to describe the *zeta* technique in the text 'The oil palm and the oil palm orchard. A contribution on *Elaeis Guineensis*' (Bittremieux and Malonda 1945). It is unclear whether this technique was used only by men, but it certainly was not a female activity associated with cooking. The authors mention that the term *zeta* comes from the Portuguese word for oil, *azeite* (1945: 168). They also point out that this oil was sold to the Portuguese and Dutch companies present in Mayombe at the end of the nineteenth century before the arrival of Belgian companies. References to shifts in the value system could also be found in the text. Bittremieux and Malonda note that the ancients partially recognised the value of the *Elaeis guineensis* palm tree in Mayombe. They drank palm wine and made a sauce from the fruit, extracting oil and adding water. They then discarded the kernel or used it to light fires. Moreover, the authors add, after the white people arrived, 'palm oil has become wealth and palm fruit has become treasure' (1945: 147).

In an interview with an older man and woman, born in the 1960s, from a Yoómbé village where I did fieldwork, the same stories were repeated about how oil was made before the mechanisation of the technique and

10 Jonathan Robins (2021: 57) explains that, in the first half of the twentieth century, Africans living in different political and social contexts produced 'hard palm oil' for export to meet global demand for oil used in the manufacture of soaps and candles.

the construction of local machines.¹¹ Once the oil was ready, the ancestors would sell it to the Portuguese.¹² They also mentioned selling the fruit. There was a time when a Portuguese man called Mangoko (spelling uncertain) would come to buy palm fruit. The measure used was the *caisse* (box in French). They calculated the quantity of fruit by placing them in a wooden box and measuring how high it was filled. They were then paid in money, although the couple did not say what kind of money was involved. If the person sold enough fruit, they received a reward in the form of a gift such as a blanket, sardines or dried fish.

It is important to recall that West Central Africa was one of the primary regions of origin for enslaved people taken to the Americas and that the Yoómbé were among the ethnic groups identified as sources of captives by historians (Almeida 2014, Silva 2017, Mobley 2015). Jonathan Robins (2021) argues that the relationship between the slave trade and the palm oil trade was more complex than has previously been addressed in historiography, including the fact that enslaved Africans produced hard oil palm for export.

In the Mayombe villages where I conducted fieldwork, in addition to being linked to the trade in fruit and *zeta* oil (measured and priced), the Portuguese were identified as slave traders. Memories about this violent practice appear in the contemporary practice of selling a person for a *ngaánga nkíísí* and in the circulation of the material and spiritual force called *kímbiindi*, both already discussed in others works (Vieira 2021, 2025). I briefly mention them here to argue that Portuguese merchants

11 These two people were the head of the lineage (*fhúúmu dikáándá*) and the head of the women (*Mama fhúúmu*). The lineage chief attends meetings with the village chief and other men. The women's chief takes care of issues brought up by the women. The interview was conducted in Kiyombe. As I have only a basic knowledge of the language, one of my main interlocutors and friends translated some passages into Lingala, a language of which I had acquired an intermediate level of knowledge and which I used to communicate with people in the field.

12 One of the interviewees said that people went to Loango to sell. However, 'Loango' may refer to various different places. Loango-Buete is the name of a village a few hours' walk from MB. Chiloango is the name of a river between Cabinda and the province of Central Congo. And Loango also refers to the coast, the area from Cape Lopez in Gabon to Luanda in Angola, and to a port in the sub-prefecture of Hinda in the Republic of Congo. These are important spaces in the trafficking of enslaved Africans (Sommerdyk 2012, Mobley 2015, Florentino 2009).

encouraged the monetisation of fruits and relatives, contributing to a reconfiguration of these practices in a different scale of value.

COLONIALISM AND OIL PALM SELECTION

The *yoómbe* palm contrasts with another, the *phúútú* palm (white, foreign, European), which is also an *Elaeis guineensis* palm but is considered to originate 'from outside the village' since these trees derive from seedlings planted during the Belgian colonial period.¹³

The *phúútú* palms are organised in plantation plots called *ndiíma leéta* (state land), which today fall under the responsibility of the chiefs. The plantations are visited only infrequently by the village population, something evidenced by the tall grass surrounding the palm trees, revealing an absence of weeding. These plots were explained by the chiefs and other elder men as a project left behind by white people at the beginning of the 1930s, who set up a germinator, a space for growing oil palm seedlings. The villagers went to collect the seedlings for planting. Each village in the grouping had its own plot.¹⁴ The land was carefully planned by an agronomist, who arranged the oil palms in regular rows and specified the spacing between seedlings. Responsibility for maintaining two rows of oil palm trees was assigned to each Yoómbe man and his family, including his wife and children. The trees took about six years to grow and the harvested fruit would be sold to foreign industries producing oil in Mayombe. Some said it was for the *Compagnie des produits*, but there were also references to SCAM (*Société de Colonisation Agricole du Mayumbe*).

The group of villages where I did my fieldwork (MB) belonged to a specific history of palm oil production in Mayombe, which was different from the experience in the HCB (*Huileries du Congo Belge*) areas. In the Mayombe region, land concessions were launched for developing a railroad across the Lower Congo (now the province of Central Congo),

13 There is a lack of botanical research to verify whether the difference in categorisation and relationship with these oil palm trees also corresponds to the botanical variations of the *Elaeis guineensis* species. These variations are based on the fruit's endocarp and are discussed later in this section.

14 Three of the MB villages collectively used the same plantation, a remnant of their origins as a single village during the colonial period before their later division.

linking the town of Boma to the navigable basin of the Chilungo River (Heyse 1927: 4).¹⁵ This first concession opened the way for land grabbing in Mayombe and for land transactions by private companies.

During the government of King Leopold II (1885–1908), agronomists were also commissioned to establish oil palm plantations at administrative posts and in Catholic and Protestant missions (Nicolai 2013: 3). When arriving in the region, the Belgians had to deal with the Portuguese and the Dutch who had already settled on land acquired directly from local chiefs.¹⁶ According to Mananga Ma Pholo (1978), the first palm oil company in the region, SCAM, was established in 1913, with its headquarters in Tshela.¹⁷ These and other companies created specific zones for the purchase of fruits from local inhabitants, who collected them from the native oil palm trees (Ma Pholo 1978: 41).

Agronomy and botany were important parts of the Belgian colonial economy. From the 1920s, the Belgians launched studies to improve oil palm cultivation in the Congo basin and the Mayombe coastal region (Vanderweyen et al. 1953: 2). The INEAC (*Institut National pour l'Étude Agronomique du Congo Belge*) set up research centres throughout the colony.¹⁸ The most important of these was located in Yangambi, where a collection of varieties of the species *Elaeis guineensis* was assembled. These varieties were collected in the colony, but also came from other regions through exchanges of materials with IRHO (*Institut Français de Recherches des Huiles et Oléagineux*, linked to former French colonies in Africa) and SOCFIN (*Sociétés Financières des Caoutchoucs* in Malaysia)

15 The notion of 'vacant land' is linked to the apparatus of colonial occupation and expropriation, entirely ignoring the relationship of the original populations to the land and its resources. Belgian authorities adopted the land concession system, which allowed them to exploit the Congo's resources for the benefit of the metropolis. Under this system, private companies were given the right to the fruits of palm trees growing on supposedly vacant lands (Heyse 1947).

16 Starting with a decree in 1895, properties in Mayombe were registered under the names of Portuguese individuals, Portuguese and Dutch private companies, and Catholic and Protestant missions (Heyse 1928).

17 Even before the Belgian colonial period, Tshela was an important commercial hub connecting border regions such as Cabinda and the Republic of Congo. With the installation of the colonial authority in the city and the implementation of the railroad, commercial activities in Tshela were intensified (Di Mbumba 2017: 230).

18 One of INEAC's most important figures was the agronomist Leplae, who had a productivist and authoritarian vision (Poncelet 2018: 313).

(Vanderweyen et al. 1953: 3). The Belgian agronomists identified three variants of the oil palm tree: *dura* (D), *pisifera* (P) and *tenera* (T). The latter originated through a natural intraspecies hybridisation between *dura* (male inflorescence) and *pisifera* (female inflorescence). Belgian agronomists also invested in crossing D and P to reproduce T, a variety whose fruits have more pulp. They were the first to plant a monocrop of the T variety (Corley and Tinker 2004: 241). In the 1930s, INEAC distributed seeds from T x T crosses for commercial plantations in the colony, aiming to renew and replace native oil palm trees so as to increase the supply of fruit for industrial use (Nicolăi 2013).

The *ndiima leéta* (state plantations) were probably among those cultivated using oil palm seedlings of the T variant planted in Mayombe during this same period. These plantations were part of a system of 'cooperation between Europeans and Africans' created to promote the exportation of agricultural produce (Jewsiewicki 1977). Based on Africans supplying raw materials to European industries, which held a monopoly on processing and trade, this system was first experimented with cotton, then with palm oil and rice. It formed part of the Belgian colonial economy's initiatives to rationalise the methods of exploiting labor and resources, especially after the Great Depression of 1930. According to Jewsiewicki (1977: 171), the system led to the domination of a traditional, agrarian and black sector by a modern, industrialised and white sector. It also implied the integration of the local colonial economy into the wider global economic system.

As discussed in the previous section, however, people from Mayombe were already part of a global economy that sustained plantations in the Americas. What occurred were displacements and extensions of scalable landscapes, causing the disciplinarisation of a species – the oil palm – in the village territories. The reproduction and insertion of the *phúútú* palm was an experiment resulting from the circulation of botanical and agronomic knowledge between the metropolis and the colony, and between the colonies in Africa and Southeast Asia.

In Mayombe the production of industrial palm oil depended on native oil palm trees, not just those selected and introduced into plantations. Before 1960, two-thirds of industrial oil production came from fruit collected by villagers through extractive activities or from their small plantations (Ma Pholo 1978). Industrial oil was also produced at the same time as local oil, made in the villages. After the Second World

War, the administrative authorities introduced severe measures to prevent the inhabitants from making their own oil, thereby guaranteeing the supply of fruit to the industrial sector.¹⁹ The deterioration of relations between the local inhabitants and the industries, combined with the *Zarianisation* policy (1973) implemented during the government of Seso Seko Mobutu (1965-1997), were factors in the decline of industrial production (Ma Pholo 1978).²⁰ Local production for the domestic market continues today.

In 2005, non-industrial production in the country amounted to 190,000 tons. At the time, it was estimated that this figure could reach 300,000 tons by 2015. In the province of Central Congo, in the same year, the production of local inhabitants was estimated at 15,000 tons, while the agro-industrial sector produced just 150 tons.²¹

A LOCAL MACHINE AND THE TIMING OF THE VILLAGE MARKET

Nowadays in Mayombe, the relational universe of the *yoómbe* palm tree is governed by different rhythms related to the passing of the weeks, months and year. Houses and people are constituted through a relationship with the *yoómbe* oil palms situated in the middle of the forest, near the land cultivated for local food production. Palm wine is extracted from the top of the tree to be drunk in the village, brooms made from the leaves are sold in the local market, fruits are harvested to be cooked in the houses or processed in local machines and sold to city traders.

The introduction of a new technique for processing palm oil through the construction of locally made machines, known as *waksi* (uncertain spelling), brought a different rhythm to production. The MB group has

19 The colonial policy of the Belgian Congo did not encourage local production. This differed to Nigeria where the British considered palm trees to be the domain of African communities, did not invest in a policy of granting land to exploit them and encouraged local production (Marchal 2001: 362, Martin 1988).

20 The Zarianisation policy consisted of the progressive expropriation and nationalisation of companies and properties belonging to foreign owners or international groups, which had harmful effects on the economy, plunging the country into a deep crisis (MacGaffey 1987: 46).

21 These data were produced by a group of Belgian consultants (Agrer-Earth Gedif 2005).

more than thirty such machines located in the middle of the forest. Although there is no precise date for when the first machine was built in Mayombe, it is possible to trace their widespread use to the second half of the twentieth century, a period accompanied by a decline in industrial production. The expansion of mechanisation, along with increased oil production by local communities, supplied an internal market, particularly the cities of Boma, Matadi and Kinshasa. This shift was also perceived by local populations as an improvement in the quality of the substance: the oil came to be described as *nlaángu nlaángu*, ‘water, water’, a characterisation that emphasises its more liquid appearance in contrast to *zeta* oil, considered thick, solid and heavy. This transformation also entailed changes in units of measurement. Fruit was sold in boxes (*caisse*) and bags (*tsako*), while *zeta* oil was wrapped in leaves. Oil produced by machines, in turn, was initially sold in 100-litre barrels and is now commonly sold in 25-litre jerrycans. The use of the jerrycans facilitated the trade in oil, since they are easier to carry on a person’s back and can be transported by motorcycle, car or truck.

These jerrycans are exchanged for money and can themselves function as a form of currency. It is a product used as a unit of account. My interlocutors in the MB villages index jerrycan numbers to amounts of money. They say, for example, ‘I gave you the money for five jerrycans [*jaune*]’. Within the village, jerrycans of oil also circulate as a means of payment. They are used to pay the rent for land, the school, the hospital; and for the purchase of artefacts such as the machete, the hoop for climbing the oil palm tree, the knife for extracting palm wine. The material quality of the oil (it lasts for months without spoiling) also allows it to be stored and the jerrycan to serve as a store of value in houses.

The non-perishability of oil allows people to cope with seasonal difficulties. A second factor shaping the relationship with time within the oil palm relational universe in Mayombe are seasonal variations. There are two main seasons: the dry season between May and September and the rainy season between October and April. During the dry season, the oil palms bear very little fruit and there are weeks when no palm oil is produced in the mills. During the rainy season, although there is plenty of fruit and oil production, the roads are badly affected, meaning that traders are unable to travel to the village where the main market is held and/or cannot transport the jerrycans to the city. Some men take advantage of these fluctuations to make more money, storing the jerrycans of

oil in their homes to sell them only during the dry season, when there is a shortage and the price rises.

The weekly market in Bula-Naku, near the MB group, held on Tuesdays, is the third defining temporal feature of the palm oil production cycle. House routines are organised so that palm oil is produced in the days leading up to the market. Between Wednesday and Monday, the men go to their plots to harvest fruit from the oil palms; their wives and children accompany them to gather the fruit that has fallen around the trunk and then separate the fruit from the bunches. Monday is generally the day when the men help each other to make the oil, while the women cook the food that is served in the machine space.

TIME, TERRITORY AND HUMAN-PLANT RELATIONSHIPS

Throughout the preceding sections, the article has sought to raise questions rather than provide definitive answers. By not seeking to compile exhaustive data to fill gaps regarding a specific time and place, I have prioritised historicising the relational universe of palm oil by weaving together tales, memories and scholarly texts. I approach ‘history’ as stories that connect and overlap, offering more ambiguities than causal explanations. This has allowed me to investigate the categorisations and distinctions that my interlocutors make regarding oil palms, such as the *yóombe* oil palm and the *phúútú* oil palm, and to analyse the relationships they have established with them. I also highlight the distinct temporal dimensions encompassed in this human-plant relationship: a mythical time of the *yóombe* tales; the time of the ancients; the presence of white people; the time of the local market; and the seasonal variations in climate.

Analysing what is or is not remembered, when memories surface, how and by whom they are described, constitutes research data and enables us to explore people’s own conceptions of past experiences. At this point, it is equally important to reflect on how the ethnographer’s presence in the field can activate collective memories. The disputes over how I was to be classified brought me into contact with other presences from the past. Some suggested that I was the sister of Nyimi, the *Yóombe* anti-hero mentioned in the first section, whilst others suspected that I might be selling children, because I was white and spoke Portuguese.

Finally, they also raised the hypothesis that I was a major investor in the palm oil industry. These speculations allowed me to engage with the ‘times’ discussed here and how they contributed to historicising the relational universe of the oil palm, influencing what was or was not remembered and how this memory was actualised.

The historical context of the relational universe of the oil palm in Mayombe helps us consider other contexts and other human-plant relationships. As we know, the contemporary oil palm agro-industry is expanding to feed biodiesel production, the food industry and the cosmetics sector. For this to happen, the oil palm has been removed from a network of relationships, subjected to selection processes and meticulously reproduced in monoculture plantations. Given the current limited use of the colonial plantation plots in Mayombe villages, I suggest that the *phúútú* (foreign, outsider) oil palm trees mark the ephemeral and the contingent. Just as they were experimented on in Mayombe, selected seedlings of the *Elaeis guineensis* palm were replanted in other locations, continually altered to ensure the expansion of the agro-industry in the twentieth century.²² Chemical transformations of palm oil were also necessary to turn the product into a global commodity. Agriculture, chemistry and global trade are thus connected.

Modifications to the oil palm and palm oil developed through the circulation of seeds, knowledge, experts and entrepreneurs between two producing regions, West and Central Africa and Southeast Asia. Over the decades, production in these two regions has followed opposite trends (Giacomin 2018). The decline in palm oil exports in the DRC and other African countries over the second half of the twentieth century runs counter to the rapid increase in production in Southeast Asia.

The incorporation of palm oil into processed foods is also linked to the harmful effects on health identified in other fats, such as animal fat and trans fat. The solution found was investment in palm oil, which generated a ‘circular dynamic between increasing demand, large production, increasing supply, decreasing prices and volatility in retail prices’ (Gesteiro et al. 2019: 2). Yet refined palm oil has also come under criticism for issues related to health and the environment. For almost two decades, environmental movements, NGOs, researchers, political

22 This is one of the characteristics of the notion of scalability, its ability to expand (Tsing 2012).

parties and the media have been denouncing the use of palm oil in processed foods.²³ These critics have made refined oil ‘visible’ to consumers, showing the relationship between monoculture oil palm production and the destruction of fauna and flora. Palm oil, which has become an invisible fat in manufactured products, is thus increasingly visible in environmentalist denunciations and campaigns.

This contrasts with the *mafúuta ma ngáazi* (crude palm oil) made in Mayombe to be sold in the cities. What guarantees its continued local production and high urban demand is precisely its taste and strong smell – in other words, its particularity and visibility. Crude palm oil is a quality of the regional cuisine of the province of Central Congo, as well as the cuisines of other regions of the DRC, other African countries and Afro-Brazilian cuisine.²⁴

So while *phúútú* oil palm marks the ephemeral, *yoómbé* oil palm is territorialised. However transformed it may be by the effects of the white presence in Mayombe, it remains part of a relational configuration between people, plants and shared substances. Territorialised oil palm trees can, of course, be seen in other African and Afro-diasporic contexts, pointing to a multifaceted space composed by oil palm trees as agencies in making a living in the gaps of slave and colonial systems.

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- 23 Gesteiro et al. (2019) describe in detail the nutritional characteristics of palm oil and its derivatives used in the food industry.
- 24 As Mintz (1996: 96) points out, a cuisine needs ‘common social roots,’ a population that eats it frequently and becomes expert in its production, knowing how it should be made and what it should taste like.

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