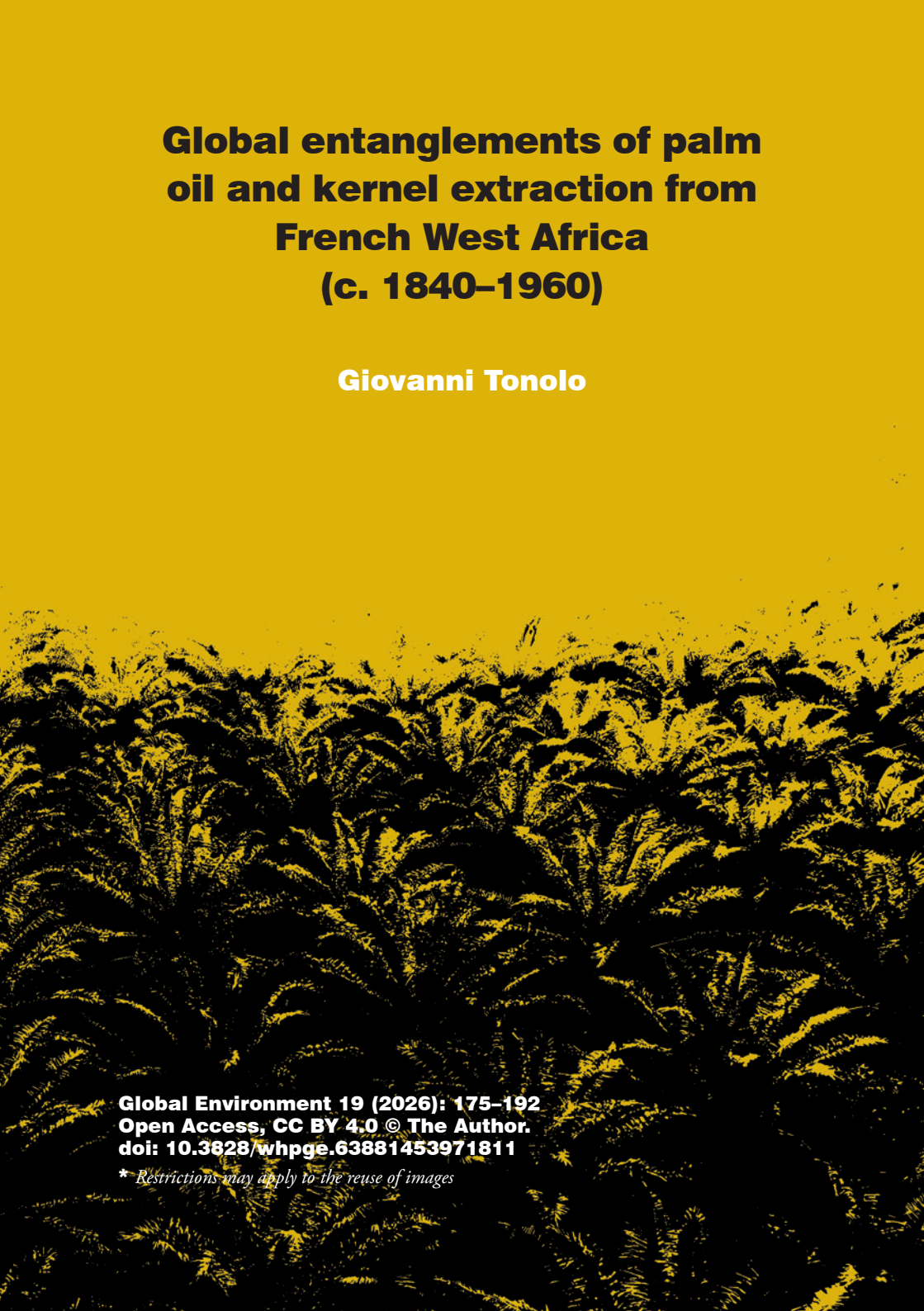


Global entanglements of palm oil and kernel extraction from French West Africa (c. 1840–1960)

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abstract

This article links the regional history of palm oil and kernel extraction in French West Africa to the global history of fat resources. It argues that what happened to fat resources produced and consumed elsewhere is crucial to understanding how the extraction of West African palm products developed over time. The article illustrates how the French became interested in West African palm oil in the nineteenth century in their search for fats for soap production, and how the colonial conquest of the region was linked to the West African groundnut crisis. In the twentieth century, the way in which palm products were then extracted owed more and more to the experience of Sumatra and Malaya: standardised plantations became the model to be replicated in West Africa, with all its environmental consequences, and the Asian oil palm trees themselves were imported to the French colonies.

keywords: *oil palm, West Africa, France, oilseeds, fat resources*

I ntroduction

Palm oil had been an intracontinental crop long before it became the staple of the global food industry that it is today. By feeding African slaves as they crossed the Atlantic since the sixteenth century, and by finding fertile soil to grow in Brazil, the palm tree and its oil arrived on a new continent before it became a true commodity.¹ When

British soapmakers began experimenting with West African palm oil in the 1790s, its trade took off. At the time, West Africans produced palm oil for cooking and soapmaking. The process involved fermenting the palm fruit and separating the oil from the rest. To obtain palm kernels, they left the fruit nuts to dry and separated them from the shell by breaking it with two stones. The kernels were much less valued by the locals, who

¹ J.E. Robins, *Oil Palm: A Global History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), especially ch. 2; C. Watkins, *Palm Oil Diaspora: Afro-Brazilian Landscapes and Economies on Bahia's Dendê Coast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 48–72.

extracted them mainly to satisfy European demand. In Europe, the kernels were processed into kernel oil, which was used to make soap, while the byproducts were used as animal feed.²

In line with the aims of this special issue of *Global Environment*, this article considers palm oil and kernels not only as global commodities in their own right, but also as part of a broader set of equally global fat resources. It borrows from the now well-established field of commodity history, which recognises the need to analyse together the sites of extraction, production and consumption of a given commodity.³ Through the analytical lens of commodity frontiers, scholars have also drawn attention to the spatial dynamics of commodity extraction, showing how what happened in very different and distant places led to crucial shifts.⁴ The specificity of a fat resource such as palm oil is that it is part of a market in which several commodities are essentially interchangeable, making the target market highly competitive. In the history of fat resources, several commodity frontiers have interacted. Veraart, for example, has shown how Dutch margarine and soap producers, relying on both vegetable and whale oil for their industries, tied the fates of some African, Asian and Antarctic regions to each other.⁵ Olukoju has illustrated how, in the 1930s, Nigerian oil palm production suffered from the competition from both whale oil and Asian oilseeds.⁶ The French colonies in West Africa that exported palm products, as, for example, Dahomey and Côte d'Ivoire, have so far remained on the margins of these interconnected histories. This can be explained by the fact

² J. Adam, *Le palmier à huile* [The oil palm] (Paris: Augustin Challamel, 1910), pp. 134–156.

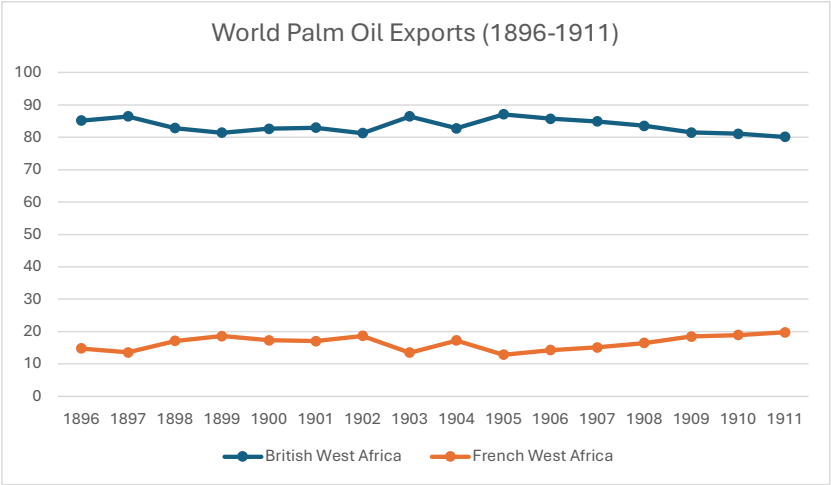
³ A seminal work of the field was S.W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985).

⁴ S. Beckert, U. Bosma, M. Schneider and E. Vanhaute, 'Commodity frontiers and the transformation of the global countryside: A research agenda', *Journal of Global History* 16 (3) (2021): 435–450.

⁵ F. Veraart, 'Catalysing socio-ecological change: The extraction and processing of edible oils, 1910–1940', *Global Environment* 15 (2) (2022): 370–397.

⁶ A. Olukoju, 'The United Kingdom and the political economy of the global oils and fats business during the 1930s', *Journal of Global History* 4 (1) (2009): 105–125.

Graph 1. Percentage of world palm-oil exports (1896–1911). For British West Africa, I have included the colonies of Nigeria, the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone; for French West Africa, those of Dahomey and Côte d’Ivoire. Belgian Congo and French Equatorial Africa have not been included because their exports were negligible.



Source: Fernand Rouget, ‘Les palmistes de l’Afrique Equatoriale Française’ [The palm kernels of French Equatorial Africa], in Congrès d’agriculture coloniale 21–25 mai 1918 [Colonial agriculture congress 21–25 May 1918], vol. 2, Section des oléagineux [Oilseeds section] (Paris: A. Fauchère, 1920), p. 319.

that the major margarine multinationals, such as Unilever, did not make significant inroads into these territories. Moreover, these areas accounted for a smaller share of the world supply, averaging 16.5 per cent between 1896 and 1911 (see Graph 1). The predominance of Anglophone literature and sources is probably also part of the explanation.

This article seeks to fill this gap by showing how the oil-palm regions of French West Africa, despite their minor importance in the global market for palm products, were intertwined with the sites of

extraction and consumption of fat resources elsewhere in the world. These connections are crucial to understanding a number of paths that the French West African oil-palm sector has taken over time. Rather than providing a complete picture of the transformation of local palm-oil production over the period considered – there are already many locally focused studies that are rich in detail⁷ – this article aims to highlight the various linkages with other sites of fat production. Some may argue that the linkages analysed in this article, focusing on Africa, Asia and Europe, but not the Americas, are more intracontinental than global. Nevertheless, I believe it is useful to refer to these entanglements as global, at least in order to exploit the emancipatory potential of global history, which is revisiting the conventional nation-state or local narratives from a more contextualised perspective.⁸ The main objective of this article is to demarginalise a region that is usually placed at the periphery of most historical accounts of fat resources.

Using primary sources from colonial journals of the period and from Beninese and French archives, this article sheds light on a series of seemingly scattered episodes. The first section reconstructs how the growing French interest in West Africa's palm products was the result of global dynamics involving different fat resources in very distant places, such as European olive oil, Asian sesame and groundnuts and African groundnuts. The second section looks at the threat to West African palm products represented by the burgeoning oil-palm sector in British Malaya and the Dutch Indies. It shows how, between the two world wars, the Marseille businessmen with trading interests in West African palm oil gradually transformed their competitors'

⁷ See, for example, M. Dissou, *Économie de la culture du palmier à huile au Bénin et en Côte d'Ivoire: Approche comparative des politiques agricoles en Afrique* [The economy of oil-palm cultivation in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire: A comparative approach of agricultural politics in Africa] (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1988).

⁸ On the emancipatory potential of global history, see for example F.N. Ammermann, P. Barrett, L. Boucher, O. Byrska, E. Chazal, V.A.B. Evang, E.C. Hussey, et al., 'For a fair(er) global history', *Cyber Review of Modern Historiography* (2021), <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/73506>.

main strength, the standardised monocrop plantations established in Southeast Asia, into a model to be replicated in West Africa. The third section, on the post-war period, argues that the promotion of the West African oil-palm sector served to relieve the pressure on the animal-fat industry in France. It also focuses on the so-called 'International Experience', an initiative of agronomic research that led to the exchange of the best oil-palm seeds and seedlings between the French African colonies, the Belgian Congo and Malaya, in order to rejuvenate the tree material of the French colonies.

The place of palm products in the nineteenth-century galaxy of fat resources

In the nineteenth century, France's commercial penetration of West Africa was driven by the latter's fat resources. As Daumalin argued, this quest was closely linked to the changes that took place in Marseille's main industry, soapmaking, during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Olive oil was the key ingredient, which, making marbled soap durable and white, guaranteed a higher quality of Marseille soaps. However, olive-oil production in southern Europe was declining and Marseille's reliance on it, while the Industrial Revolution required soap to be accessible to more and more people, became a constraint. Not only was the Marseille industry unable to compete with British producers of lower-quality oils, who could rely on alternative oilseed products such as palm oil, but it was also unable to meet the growing demand for soap.⁹

From the 1820s, soapmakers in Marseille were experimenting with the use of oils from alternative fat resources, such as linseed from Sicily, poppy seed and rapeseed from northern France. The best results were actually achieved with sesame from India and Turkey. Sesame imports were generally guaranteed by Greek merchants

⁹ X. Daumalin, *Marseille et l'Ouest africain: L'outre-mer des industriels (1841–1956)* [Marseille and West Africa: The overseas territories of the industrials (1841–1956)] (Marseille: Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie Marseille-Provence, 1992), p. 17.

who had settled in Marseille after the Ottoman retaliations in the Aegean during the Greek War of Independence. All these experiments led to the creation of a new industrial sector in the city: that of the oil mills, which by 1844 produced half of France's annual vegetable-oil output.¹⁰

However, none of these options matched the quality and appearance of the original Marseille soap. One of the main problems was the yellowish colour of the soap obtained by using oils other than olive oil: This was acceptable for British soap but not for the white or blue marbled Marseille soap. This was the reason, for example, why the first puncheons of West African palm oil that arrived in Marseille in 1823 had to be reexported: no soapmaker wanted them.¹¹ A solution was found in West African groundnuts, whose oil could be mixed with olive oil without altering the soap. In 1848, the port of Marseille became the world's first port for groundnuts, mainly imported from Guinea and Senegal.¹² In 1851, the discovery of a way to decolourise cottonseed oil also allowed it to be used in soap for the first time, and imports of cottonseed from the US and Egypt increased.¹³ However, it was the West African groundnut that made Marseille soap competitive again.

Until then, imported West African palm products had been used in candlemaking. By 1831, a process for refining stearin from sheep's suet and using it to make wax candles had offered a cheaper alternative to beeswax and tallow candles. In 1836, businessmen Louis and Frédéric Fournier opened a candle factory in Marseille and began using vegetable oils instead of animal fats to make stearin.¹⁴ By 1852, almost all of the 1,500 to 2,000 tonnes imported by the Régis company from Dahomey, where this Marseille company enjoyed a virtual monopoly, were used to make candles.¹⁵ In 1852, however,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 18; M.S. Smith, *The Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise in France, 1800–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 283.

¹¹ Robins, *Oil Palm*, p. 79.

¹² Daumalin, *Marseille et l'Ouest africain*, pp. 37–41.

¹³ Smith, *The Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise*, p. 283.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 285.

¹⁵ Y. Péhaut, *Les oléagineux dans les pays d'Afrique occidentale associés au Marché*

engineer Dominique Rougier invented a new bleaching process that allowed palm oil to be used in the Marseille soap industry without yellowing the soap.¹⁶ Palm oil thus began to supplement the supply of West African groundnuts in soap manufacture.

The golden age of complementarity between West African groundnuts and the Marseille oil mills came to an end in 1880, when shelled groundnuts from the Coromandel coast (India) suddenly replaced unshelled West African groundnuts in Marseille. Shelled groundnuts yielded thirty per cent more oil and took up less space on ships, reducing freight costs. The amount of labour available in India allowed for artisanal shelling, and the export of shelled groundnuts was made possible by a series of almost simultaneous infrastructural changes: the opening of the Suez Canal (1869), the establishment of a steamship line by the oil producers of Marseille (1875), which made the voyage to India much shorter than to Africa, and the connection of the French port of Pondicherry to the British railways, which allowed the supply of groundnuts from southern India (1879). Imports of West African groundnuts fell sharply: in 1887, Marseille received 74,000 tonnes from India and only 5,000 from West Africa.¹⁷

The crisis of West African groundnuts also had an impact on French colonisation, as it led the Marseille merchants to concentrate their trade on the palm regions of West Africa: The strategic importance of territories such as Dahomey increased. Moreover, in the same years, the Germans and the Dutch began to use the by-products of palm kernels as animal feed, which increased the fat content of milk and made it possible to obtain firmer butter. While

commun: La production, le commerce et la transformation des produits [Oilseeds in West African countries associated with the common market: Production, trade and processing of the products] (Paris: H. Champion, 1976), p. 291.

¹⁶ B. Schnapper, *La politique et le commerce français dans le golfe de Guinée de 1838 à 1871* [French policy and trade in the Gulf of Guinea from 1838 to 1871] (Paris: Mouton, 1961), p. 126.

¹⁷ Daumalin, *Marseille et l'Ouest africain*, p. 107; J. Weber, *Pondichéry et les comptoirs de l'Inde après Duplex: La démocratie au pays des castes* [Pondicherry and the trading posts of India after Duplex: Democracy in the land of castes] (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1996), p. 281.

in 1860 Hamburg was not involved in the palm-kernel trade at all, by 1885 the German port had become the world's largest importer. It was the combination of the groundnut crisis and competition for palm products that led Marseille merchants and shipowners, such as Cyprien Fabre, to successfully lobby for a first French military intervention in Dahomey in 1890.¹⁸ The kingdom of Abomey put up fierce resistance and only surrendered in 1894: the colony of Dahomey was officially founded one year later.

The geographical shift in groundnut production also had environmental consequences. Faced with falling sales prices, Senegalese farmers abandoned groundnut cultivation and found an alternative cash crop in rubber. The alleged disappearance of the climbing shrub *Landolphia Heudelotii*, from which farmers in Baol and Niayes extracted latex, was believed to be a consequence of the groundnut crisis.¹⁹ On the other hand, the area devoted to groundnuts in southern India increased rapidly within a few years: In 1882, the district of South Arcot used 48,000 acres for groundnut cultivation; by 1890, groundnut cultivation took up 185,876 acres.²⁰ In Coromandel, intensive monocropping without the use of fertiliser or crop rotation, driven by the immense demand from Marseille, led to soil depletion and degeneration of groundnut seeds. Between 1895 and 1898, groundnut production in the Madras presidency fell by two thirds.²¹ In 1897, the Pondicherry Chamber of Commerce introduced groundnut varieties from Senegal and Bombay, the Saidapet agronomic institute experimented with varieties from West and East Africa, Mauritius, Japan and the United States, while

¹⁸ Daumalin, *Marseille et l'Ouest africain*, p. 112; Péhaut, *Les oléagineux dans les pays d'Afrique occidentale*, pp. 385–386.

¹⁹ A. Chevalier, 'La production du caoutchouc sylvestre en Afrique Tropicale' [The production of wild rubber in tropical Africa], *Revue de botanique appliquée et d'agriculture coloniale* 1 (2) (1921): 83–101, at 86.

²⁰ 'L'Arachide dans l'Inde Anglaise' [The Groundnut in British India], *Bulletin des Matières Grasses* 1 (1) (1919): 17–23, at 18.

²¹ S. Talawar, *Peanut in India: History, Production, and Utilization*, Peanut in Local and Global Food Systems – Series Report no. 5 (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2004), p. 3.

private companies attempted to grow a variety from Mozambique. By 1900, the local groundnut variety had entirely disappeared, while the new ones allowed production to resume rapidly.²² However, the temporary fall in Asian supplies and the establishment of steamship lines between Marseille and West Africa rendered Senegalese groundnuts competitive again.

Turning a threat into a model: Competing with Asian oil palm

From the late 1910s, a new threat from Asia loomed for the merchants of West African fat resources. This time the concerns were about palm products. As early as January 1914, the president of the main Marseille trading company operating in West Africa, the Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Occidentale (CFAO), reported that the African monopoly on palm products was being threatened by the development of large plantations of high-yielding oil palms in Southeast Asia.²³ The first oil palms had been brought from West Africa to the Buitenzorg Botanical Gardens in 1848, but the first plantations were set up between 1911 and 1912 in British Malaya and the Dutch Indies. In the latter, the main architect was the Belgian businessman Adrien Hallet, who, after a series of disappointing attempts to invest in rubber and palms in the Belgian Congo and French Dahomey, had tried his luck on another continent. There, it proved much easier to secure land and labour on a large scale. In addition, the higher and more regular rainfall made the ecology of these areas even more favourable to the oil palm than in its region of origin.²⁴ From then on, palm products became not only part of

²² C. Valentino, 'Le commerce des arachides à Pondichéry' [The trade of groundnuts in Pondicherry], *Bulletin du comité de l'Asie française* 5 (50) (1905): 186–95, at 187; 'L'Arachide dans l'Inde Anglaise', 18.

²³ H. Bonin, *CFAO (1887–2007): La réinvention permanente du commerce outre-mer* [CFAO (1887–2007): The ongoing reinvention of overseas trade] (Mérucès: Publications de la SFHOM, 2008), p. 91.

²⁴ J.E. Robins, 'Shallow roots: The early oil palm industry in Southeast Asia,

a global system of interconnected and increasingly interchangeable fat resources, but were also produced in very distant places. The fate of West African palm products was therefore no longer tied solely to that of other oilseed products – whose prices still influenced the price of palm products in Marseille and thus on local African markets – but also to the palm sectors elsewhere.

As with the South American rubber tree, Southeast Asia seemed on the verge of overtaking African oil-palm producers. In fact, the process took longer than that of rubber, and West Africa would retain the largest share of global palm-oil exports until the 1960s.²⁵ Nevertheless, the possibility that the soap industry might soon be able to do without West African palm oil seemed very realistic and prompted the Marseille trading companies to get to work, even before Southeast Asia began exporting palm products in 1923. In 1919, the Colonial Institute of Marseille, with funding provided from the CFAO and the Société Commerciale de l'Ouest Africaine (SCAO), commissioned Belgian scientist Gaston Van Pelt, a former inspector of the Société Financière des Caoutchoucs (Socfin) rubber and oil-palm plantations in Sumatra, to investigate how the West African oil-palm sector could benefit from the new methods used in Southeast Asia.²⁶ Van Pelt's position, shared by the Colonial Institute, was that the large plantations established in Southeast Asia should be replicated in Africa.²⁷

French officials and agronomists in the African colonies, on the other hand, either dismissed the Asian threat or argued that im-

1848–1940', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* **51** (4) (2020): 538–560. In Dahomey, Hallet was a member of the Compagnie de l'Ouémé in 1900: Péhaut, *Les oléagineux dans les pays d'Afrique occidentale*, p. 591.

²⁵ V. Giacomini, 'The transformation of the global palm oil cluster: Dynamics of cluster competition between Africa and Southeast Asia (c. 1900–1970)', *Journal of Global History* **13** (3) (2018): 374–398.

²⁶ G. Van Pelt, 'Le palmier à huile : L'exploitation des peuplements naturels et la culture rationnelle' [The oil palm: Exploitation of natural groves and rational cultivation], *Bulletin des Matières Grasses* **1** (1) (1919): 217–241.

²⁷ E. Baillaud, 'Le rôle du palmier à huile dans la production mondiale des matières grasses' [The role of the oil palm in global fat production], *Bulletin des Matières Grasses* **1** (1) (1919): 121–136.

proving the palm varieties through inbreeding and the efficiency of indigenous cultivation would be enough to maintain exports.²⁸ Such arguments were reinforced by the fact that establishing large plantations required more investment and political risk with African landowners than the colonial administration was prepared to take. In 1922, therefore, the colonial administration set up two experimental stations for oil palms: the main one was founded in La Mé (Côte d'Ivoire) and a smaller one, with a laboratory but no technological workshop, in Pobè (Dahomey), despite the fact that Dahomey was by far the main exporter of palm products. The idea was that the margins for improvement were greater in Côte d'Ivoire because the climate, especially the higher rainfall, was more favourable for oil-palm cultivation, and there were still large tracts of supposedly unowned land that could be converted into plantations.²⁹ The stations had four main functions: to breed selected high-yielding palms, to study the best undergrowth and intercropping techniques, to test and improve mechanical extraction tools, and to control the effects of parasites on the trees.³⁰ In the 1920s and even more so in the 1930s, due to the disruptive impact of the Great Depression, the cautious and economical approach of colonial officials prevailed.

The Vichy regime marked a turning point. In July 1941, Charles Platon, the secretary of state for the colonies, asked Robert Michaux – Hallet's nephew and a successful rubber and oil-palm planter in Malaya, as well as a Socfin manager – to prepare a development programme for West African oilseed products.³¹ At the end of 1941,

²⁸ See for example Y. Henry, 'Documents sur le palmier à huile à Sumatra' [Documents on the oil palm in Sumatra], *Bulletin économique de l'Indochine* 29 (2) (1926): 1–19.

²⁹ Y. Henry and A. Houard, *Étude et Projets d'amélioration de l'exploitation du Palmier à Huile: Stations Expérimentales* [Study and projects for improving oil-palm exploitation: experimental stations] (Paris: Émile Larose, 1922), pp. 5–6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³¹ R. Michaux, 'Le développement du palmier à huile en Afrique française' [Oil palm development in French Africa], in *Semaine du palmier à huile et du cocotier* [Oil palm and coconut week] (Paris: IRHO, 1943), pp. 105–114, at p. 106. On Vichy as crucial for France's postwar modernisation policies, see for example C. Bonneuil and F. Thomas, 'Purifying landscapes: The Vichy regime and

with the creation of the Institut de recherches pour les huiles et oléagineux (IRHO), Platon also fulfilled Michaux's request for an institute that would enable entrepreneurs to vertically organise and direct the activity of the African stations from Paris. A conference on oleaginous products, held in Vichy from 10 to 13 November 1941, not only highlighted the serious shortages affecting France, but also directly attacked the approach adopted in West Africa to date, in particular the lack of an integrated overall plan. This choice had discouraged 'serious companies' and led to a 'waste' of resources: a plan for the development of colonial fat resources was not only essential, but had also to be drawn up by companies that 'had never used their capital for the benefit of French Africa', such as Socfin.³²

Vichy's criticism of the Third Republic's previous efforts paved the way for businessmen not directly involved in the West African oil-palm sector. The Japanese occupation of the Malay Peninsula and the Dutch East Indies from 1941 to 1945 drove several planters back to Africa.³³ In fact, the Rivaud group, the main plantation company of the French Empire, which also owned Socfin, already controlled some assets in Côte d'Ivoire and the Belgian Congo: If this was a return, it was also true that some of these businessmen had never really left West Africa.³⁴ Michaux wanted to 'transplant' to Africa the standardised plantations developed in Asia: His model was the Johore Labis plantation in Malaya, which had replaced 10,000 hectares of tropical forest.³⁵ Southeast Asia's achievements

the genetic modernization of France', *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 40 (4) (2010): 532–568.

³² 'Mesures proposées par la Conférence des oléagineux' [Measures proposed by the oilseeds conference], 14 Nov. 1941, in Archives Nationales de l'Outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereafter ANOM), 1 AFFECO 77.

³³ Giacomini, 'The transformation of the global palm oil cluster', 390.

³⁴ W.G. Clarence-Smith, 'The Rivaud Hallet Plantation Group in the economic crises of the interwar years', in P. Lanthier and H. Watelet (eds), *Private Enterprises During Economic Crises: Tactics and Strategies* (Ottawa: Legas, 1998), p. 127; Péhaut, *Les oléagineux dans les pays d'Afrique occidentale*, pp. 114–132, at p. 633.

³⁵ R. Michaux, 'Les palmeraies modernes d'extrême-orient' [The modern palm groves in the Far East], in *Semaine du palmier à huile et du cocotier* [Oil palm and coconut week] (Paris: IRHO, 1943), pp. 23–58.

thus influenced palm-oil extraction in French West Africa in two ways: first, by putting increased pressure through market competition; second, by providing a model to be replicated, i.e. the creation of huge oil mills and standardised plantations of selected palm trees.

Late colonial exploitation of an internationalised palm tree

After the fall of Vichy, Michaux's role in developing French oilseeds in Africa was confirmed, as was the plantation-based approach, although the creation of new plantations for a long time only remained on paper. Postwar plans prioritised recovering French industries. In France oilseeds were sold at a fixed price by the Groupement National d'Achat des Produits Oléagineux (GNAPO), an intertrade company under the authority of the French Ministry of Industry set up in 1946 to replace a similar organisation first created by the Vichy regime.³⁶ GNAPO bought West African palm oil well below the world-market price and sold it at a much higher one, with the profits going into a compensation fund for metropolitan producers of fat resources. Between the end of 1945 and the first months of 1946, Sourou-Migan Apithy, the Dahomean representative in the Constituent Assembly, denounced on several occasions that GNAPO paid only 3,000 to 3,500 French francs per tonne for palm oil and sold it in France for 38,000 francs.³⁷ The situation improved only slightly, and in 1949 GNAPO was still selling West African palm oil at a thirty per cent premium in order to maintain the compensation fund.³⁸ In return, metropolitan fat resources were sold by GNAPO

³⁶ A. Heilbronner, 'Le ravitaillement en France depuis 1940' [Supply provisioning of France since 1940], *Revue d'économie politique* 57 (6) (1947): 1644–1682, at 1654.

³⁷ V. Thompson and R. Adloff, *French West Africa* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1958), p. 468; S.-M. Apithy, *Au service de mon pays, 1946–1956* [In the service of my country, 1946–1956] (Montrouge: Dalex, 1957), pp. 175–176.

³⁸ L. Pierrein, *Industries traditionnelles du port de Marseille: Le cycle des sucres et des oléagineux 1870–1958* [Traditional industries of the port of Marseille: The

at much lower prices. The main beneficiaries were tallow producers: In France, palm oil became more expensive than tallow, even though the latter was higher in the hierarchy of oilseeds.³⁹ West African palm-oil producers thus subsidised French animal-fat producers, foreclosing their own market outlets. GNAPO ended up with 9,000 tonnes of unsaleable palm oil and, on 28 June 1949, had to stop buying palm oil from French Africa until October of the same year.⁴⁰

Although the establishment of palm plantations in West Africa was not as rapid as Michaux had hoped, the IRHO was able to launch an unprecedented scientific initiative in oil-palm breeding. Oil-palm selection, which began with the establishment of the first research stations in the early 1920s, had not led to higher yields.⁴¹ The fact that fifteen years of selection in the colonies had been almost useless gave the private sector an additional excuse to take over the reins of agronomic research during the Vichy regime. The IRHO, whose activities already extended beyond French West Africa, including a research station in Sibiti (Congo), tried to introduce trees from other places by organising the so-called 'international experience'. The aim of this initiative was to study the behaviour of different varieties on different soils and in different climates, as well as the crossing of varieties from very different origins. Set up in 1947 by Michaux, his brother Pierre and Belgian agronomist Maurice Ferland, it involved five research stations: the three IRHO research stations in Africa (La Mè, Pobè and Sibiti), the station of the Institut

sugar and oilseed cycle 1870–1958] (Marseille: Institut historique de Provence, 1975), p. 295.

³⁹ T. Revillon to M. Petsche, 19 Sep. 1949, in ANOM, 1 AFFECO 449–450.

⁴⁰ F. Augier to T. Revillon, 1 Sep. 1949, in ANOM, 1 AFFECO 449–450; Syndicat général des producteurs et exportateurs d'huile de palme des colonies françaises [General union of oil-palm producers and exporters of the French colonies], Note sur la situation des huiles de palme en provenance des territoires d'Outre-Mer [Note on the situation of palm oil from overseas territories], 7 Nov. 1949, 1, in ANOM, 1 AFFECO 449–450.

⁴¹ C. Surre and R. Ziller, *Le palmier à huile* [The oil palm] (Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1963), pp. 27–32.

National pour l'Étude Agronomique du Congo Belge (INEAC) in Yangambi (Belgian Congo) and the Socfin plantations in Malaya. Each participant had to send to the others 250 seeds of their ten best varieties. These exchanges, which were logistically very difficult at the time, began at the end of 1948.⁴² The IRHO was thus projecting itself outside the borders of French Africa. As early as 1952, it established contacts with the Brazilian Instituto Nacional de Oleos and signed a technical cooperation agreement in 1959.⁴³ After the independence of France's African colonies in 1960, the IRHO diversified its activities into several other countries in South America, Southeast Asia, Oceania and Africa.

The results of the 1955 harvest made it clear that crossing Deli palms from Malaya with another specific palm variety from either Côte d'Ivoire or Congo was the most productive choice.⁴⁴ The descendants of the first oil palms brought to Java a century earlier were now returning to West Africa to revitalise its production. From 1958, the selected oil palms produced by the research stations in French West Africa were exclusively the result of this crossbreeding. From 1957 to 1960, the La Mè and Johore Labis (Malaya) stations produced similar yields from the same varieties. Although the results in Pobè were slightly inferior because of less rainfall in Dahomey, the international crossbreeding had largely compensated for the different ecological conditions.⁴⁵

It was with these selected palms that independent Dahomey and Côte d'Ivoire eventually established plantations in the 1960s, thanks to increased funding from international aid agencies. Alter-

⁴² IRHO, Rapport annuel 1948 [Annual report 1948], in ANOM, 1 AFFE-CO 469; C. Surre, *L'Institut de recherches pour les huiles et oléagineux 1942–1984* [The research institution for oils and oilseeds 1942–1984] (Paris: CIRAD, 1993), pp. 30–31.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 38.

⁴⁴ R. Carrière de Belgarric, 'Concours de l'IRHO au développement du palmier à huile au Dahomey' [IRHO support for the development of oil-palm cultivation in Dahomey], *Oléagineux* 22 (4) (1967): 11–17, at 12.

⁴⁵ IRHO, Rapport annuel 1960 [Annual report 1960], pp. 19, 64, in Archives du Centre de Recherches Agricoles Plantes Pérennes, Pobè, ARMO/1900/0066.

native production systems that had characterised colonial oil-palm development until the late 1950s, such as the introduction of selected high-yielding palm trees into smallholding palm groves or intercropping with food crops, were eventually abandoned in favour of standardised monoculture plantations. In Dahomey, these led to the loss of land for food production, fallow land and increased soil depletion. In Côte d'Ivoire instead, the replication of the Asian model led to even more serious environmental consequences: It is estimated that 45,000 hectares out of the 70,000 hectares envisaged in the first oil-palm plan in Côte d'Ivoire, launched in 1961, replaced forest areas.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The history of the extraction of palm products in French West Africa is linked to that of other fat resources in the world in many ways. Palm oil was first imported to Marseille to supplement and replace animal fats in candlemaking and, after the discovery of a bleaching process, it replaced olive oil in soapmaking. The subsequent mixed fortunes of West African groundnuts, compared with the sudden boom in Indian shelled groundnuts, prompted France to conquer the palm territory of Dahomey before it fell into foreign hands. In French West Africa, the way palm oil and kernel were produced owed more and more to the experience of Southeast Asia. Oil-palm cultivation based on large standardised plantations became the model to follow, and the rubber and oil-palm planters of Sumatra and Malaya were called upon to draw up plans for the West African oilseed products. Eventually, Malayan oil-palm trees were brought back to West Africa to increase local yields.

The oil-palm region of French West Africa, although less impor-

⁴⁶ E. Cheyns, J.-P. Colin and F. Ruf, *Relations entre agro-industries et dynamiques d'évolution des exploitations familiales et du milieu rural: agriculture contractuelle et industrie du palmier à huile en Côte d'Ivoire* [Relations between agro-industries and dynamics of change in family farms and rural areas: Contract farming and the oil palm industry in Côte d'Ivoire] (Rome, Montpellier: FAO, CIRAD, 2012), p. 21.

tant in the global trade, can therefore be included in the interconnected histories of fat resources. The scattered episodes discussed in this article also show the potential of linking the economic, colonial and environmental histories of fat-resources extraction. The turning points analysed resulted from the intersection of economic pressures, colonial policies and environmental constraints in different locations. Trade interests or the availability of cheap labour could influence colonisation policies or facilitate the relocation of production to another region. However, economic factors were intertwined with the political calculations of colonial administrations, such as the French unwillingness to take political risks by establishing plantations in West Africa, and environmental characteristics that made a region more or less suitable. In turn, trade shifts and the introduction of new crops and agricultural practices led to environmental changes, such as soil depletion, loss of local varieties and deforestation. By decentralising the study of a commodity chain, this paper captures the multifaceted complexity of globalised industrialisation.

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