

## **The social life of palm oil: From indigenous communities to global economic discourses**

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### **Abstract**

The economy, understood as the process of production, distribution and consumption, is organized in a way that goods, commodities and merchandise appear in our daily lives in front of us without us knowing their origins and the track they took. Using Appadurai's approach in studying commodities and goods, this essay analyses how the African palm oil industry affects the livelihood of indigenous communities. It provides a general overview of the African palm market globally and in Guatemala. This is followed by an analysis of the three main effects the agro-industry has on the local population: land-grabbing and dispossession, violation of labour rights and ecocide (with special regard to the pollution of rivers). The ecocide in the Río la Pasión had the social force to trigger the urban population, as well as the rural population, to ask the state to make accountable the agro-industrial firms for the abuses affecting the environment – especially rivers. Finally, some normative considerations are offered, calling not for an end to palm oil production but more responsible conduct in this area by all the actors involved, including the consumption.

**Keywords:** palm oil, Guatemala, ecocide, environment

### **Introduction**

Products as diverse as Ben & Jerry's ® ice cream, Kit Kat ® chocolate, Colgate ® tooth cream, and Dove ® soap, all have a thing in common: African palm oil as one of their ingredients.

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<sup>1</sup> The author has done fieldwork for more than three years in maya-q'eqchi' indigenous communities in Chisec, Alta Verapaz. This area has many potentially conflict-inducing agrarian megaprojects (hydroelectric power production, palm plantations, highway construction, petroleum operations), along with indigenous communities, and a corridor of the drugs trade. The author first worked with a grassroots organization (focused on peasant economies) and subsequently with an international NGO (focused on sexual and reproductive health for adolescent girls). He has also studied at Corvinus University in the past within the framework of a Joint European Master program in Comparative Local Development.

African palm is a monoculture embedded in a complex web of social and economic dynamics. The crop, after being harvested, needs to be transformed into palm oil. Subsequently to this, several chemical transformations are required so it can be an ingredient or basic element in the composition of daily products like Nutella ® or Head & Shoulders ®. Its presence goes largely unnoticed by the majority of people. At the same time, palm oil is also used for the production of biofuels.

African palm is being planted in countries along the tropical belt of the planet such as Guatemala, Colombia, Ecuador, Nigeria, Indonesia and Malaysia among others. This essay argues that the global demand for palm oil (agro-business) has a negative impact on the livelihood of local populations (at the social, economical and ecological levels) and the situation of Guatemala's indigenous communities is a micro-level representation of this effect. Basically, this article briefly sketches the story of the social life of palm oil in Guatemala with a view to the negative implications that are often lost in an abstract discourse of green products.

As such, the article is intended to be a contribution to the application of the approach of anthropologist-historians Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff in studying the "social life and cultural biographies of things." Although this perspective is not new (it dates from around the mid-1980s), it may shed light on how the palm plantations and palm oil are understood in different social scenarios. One of the basic ideas from these anthropological theorists is that in order to comprehend the circulation of things it is necessary to look not only at the meaning the market assigns to them, but the meaning other actors assign to them (Appadurai, 1986: 19). In this sense, meaning does not derive just from attributions and human motivations (the value of the exchange), but from its forms and trajectories (the exchange of values). Furthermore, Appadurai argues that "...what creates the link between exchange and value is politics, constructed broadly" (1986: 3). Only by analyzing the political strategies the palm plantations use toward the indigenous communities in Guatemala, and the effects they have, is it possible to tell part of the story of the social life of palm oil.

The structure of the article is as follows: the first section provides general information on palm plantations and the consumption of palm oil. The second section shows the context of palm plantations in Guatemala and the fact that they have expanded. The third section describes two direct and violent strategies the palm companies use to acquire more land. The fourth section depicts one subtle violent strategy that the entrepreneurs use (in practice) to make acceptable (in discourse) the palm oil production

at the national and local levels: with reference to job creation and the conditions in the palm sector. The fifth section is about the direct impact of the palm plantations and palm oil on the environment where indigenous communities live, and the description of the ecocide of the Río la Pasión. The last section offers a conclusion and at the same time puts forward the idea of “palm oil certificates.” It reflects on whether this is merely a discourse from the companies concerned, or an actual positive practice.

### **General information about palm oil around the world**

African palm<sup>2</sup> kernels and African palm oil can be used for a diverse set of products. It is possible to divide these products into the following categories: biofuels, agri-food industry (French fries, cakes, ice cream, etc.), cosmetic and soap industry, chemical industry (paintings, waxes and plastics), and animal feed. For palm oil to be present in these products as an ingredient different ways of processing are required, determined by the times the oil has gone through various chemical and thermal processes<sup>3</sup> (neutralisation, bleaching, deodorising, fractionation, hydrogenation and rearrangement, among others) to change its boiling point (van Gelder, 2004: 5-7).

In 2010, on a global scale, the usage of palm oil was distributed approximately in this way among the different products mentioned above: 71% for food consumption, 24% for consumer products and 5% for energy (Rainforest Rescue: 2). Palm oil, now, has more market share than other edible oils, but consumption and production of practically all oils has increased since the 1980s. In great part, this has happened because it is more efficient, both more productive and cheaper, to produce: it is possible to grow more African palm trees in the same surface area than it is for example in the case of soybean and other seed oils (van Gelder, 2013: 10-17).

The trend is that there will be a further increase in palm oil demand because of the expansion of biofuel consumption – having a direct impact again in countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America (Guereña & Zepeda, 2013: 13). The direct evidence of this fact is that Neste Oil<sup>4</sup> has installed a processing biofuel plant in the port of Rotterdam. The

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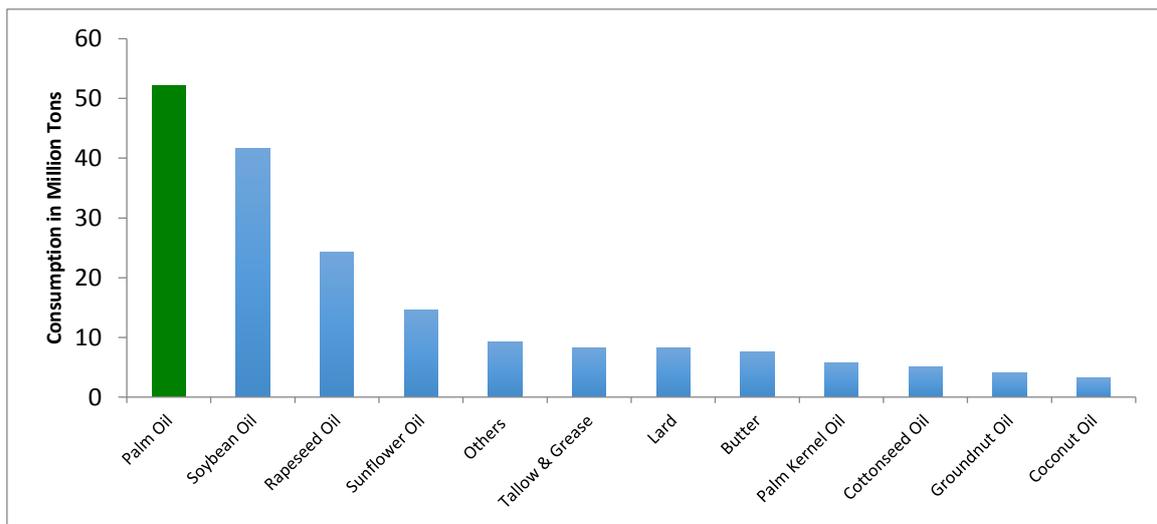
<sup>2</sup> The scientific name for the plant (in Latin) is *Elaeis guineensis*. It is a native plant of West Africa, more precisely the region of Angola and Gambia. There is another species of palm oil that is called American oil palm (*Elaeis oleifera*), but it is not harvested for commercial purposes. Rather, hybrids of both species are produced to enhance resistance to diseases and production.

<sup>3</sup> The explanation of these mechanical, chemical and thermal processes is beyond the scope of the essay.

<sup>4</sup> Neste is an oil company based in Finland with refineries in countries such as the Netherlands and Singapore. Interestingly, it dropped the word “oil” from its name as part of its new image. More information is available on the company’s website, at [www.neste.com](http://www.neste.com)

Netherlands will thus have the capacity to make 800 thousand tons of biofuel per year, starting in 2015 – the biggest biofuel plant in Europe (Maula, 2009).

The global palm oil production has increased over the last two decades. In 1997, the demand for palm oil was 17.7 million tons. By 2012, it was 52.1 million tons. Moreover, it is expected that in 2050 it will be 77 million tons, if not more (Stevenson, 2014). The following graph in *Figure 1* compares the consumption of palm oil with other seed oils.



**Figure 1: Consumption of palm oil vs. other seed oils. Source: Oil world (2013) in Sime Darby's<sup>5</sup> fact sheet of 2014.**

Another way to illustrate the demand for palm oil is through a discussion of the history of its production.

African palm plantations have been concentrated in Malaysia and Indonesia since 1970. Until 1980, the production of palm oil of these two countries was below 5,000 metric tons. In the next decade it doubled. Since 1995, the production has increased by 65% (van Gelder, 2013: 12). This means that in ten years following the year 1995, these two countries produced the amount that they had produced over the course of the previous 25 years.

Because the chain of supply is fragmented both spatially and temporally,<sup>6</sup> it is possible to have different companies profiting from diverse parts of the process. For

<sup>5</sup> Sime Darby is a company that has African palm plantations around the world.

<sup>6</sup> Spatially: because it can be produced in different parts of the world – and temporarily: because producers and distributors can hold the product and store it when demand favours them.

example, the largest palm oil producers are Wilmar, Sime Darby, Unigra and Sinar Mas. The major palm oil traders are Cargill and Archer Daniels Mills<sup>7</sup> (Foresthrooes, 2015). Many of these corporations have their operations in Asian countries and have been the subject of controversy related to environmental and social issues from time to time (Oakford, 2014; Howard, 2015; Lamb, 2015; Forest peoples programmes, 2015; Humber & Pakiam, 2015; Manibo, 2015; Norman, 2015<sup>8</sup>).

One of the major buyers for all of the companies mentioned above is Unilever, with headquarters in Britain and the Netherlands. It is also possible to mention Henkel, based in Germany, as well as Procter & Gamble, based in Britain and the U.S. (World Wide Fund, 2013: 15-19) It is safe to say that the major regions in the world who consume palm oil are Europe and Asia (especially China, along with India and Indonesia).<sup>9</sup>

### **Guatemala's landscape**

Guatemala is a country in Central America that has access to the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. It is a country of diverse microclimates. Although the soil of Guatemala is forest oriented, since Colonial and even pre-Hispanic times it has been used for agriculture and from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for intensive agriculture with crops like: coffee, cotton, banana, corn, and more recently sugar cane and African palm. Indigenous communities have been in Guatemala since before the inception of the state. There has not been an official census since 2002 in Guatemala; the conservative authorities estimate that only 30% of the population is made up of indigenous people while some others argue that they might constitute at least 70%. The apparent democracy of Guatemala is permeated by a structural racism<sup>10</sup> manifest in how the non-Mayan population is largely in control of key economic, political, cultural and social positions – including in the production of palm oil.

African palm monoculture was introduced during the 1960s but it started gaining importance especially in the late 1970s because it then replaced the former cotton plantations. Since then, it has experienced a nearly geometrical increase. Nowadays,

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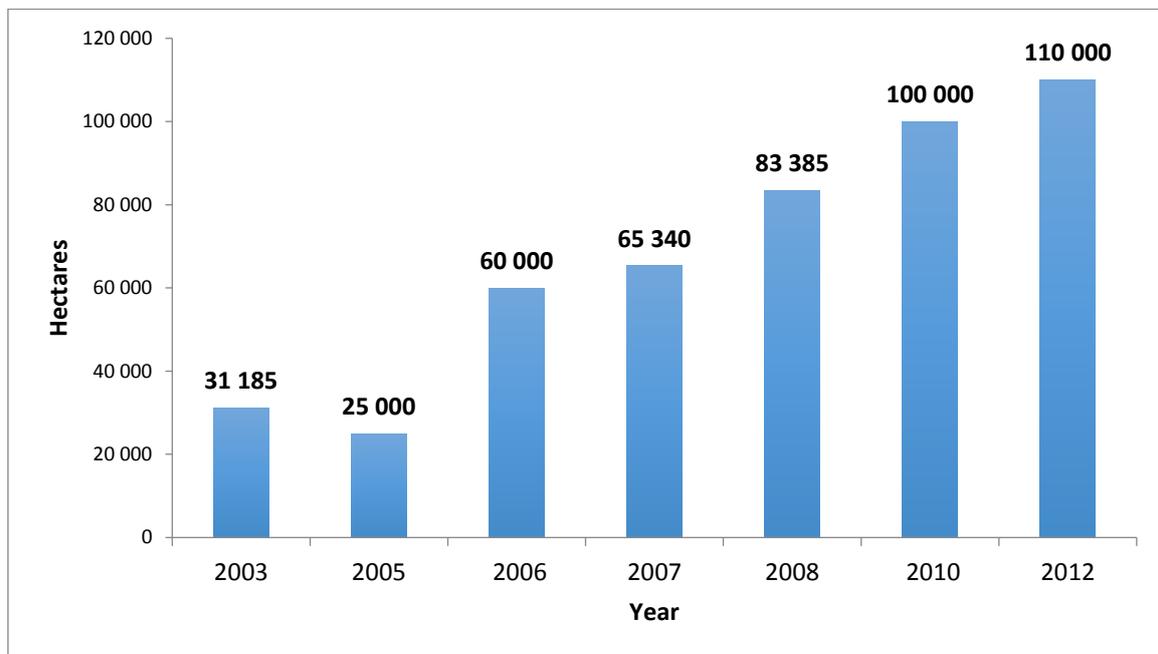
<sup>7</sup> The headquarters for these corporations range from Italy (Unigra), Indonesia (Wilmar) to the USA (Cargill), along with other countries.

<sup>8</sup> See the sources listed here related to an environmental scandal implicating Wilmar's operation in Nigeria, Africa.

<sup>9</sup> According to the web page [palmoilresearch.org](http://palmoilresearch.org) China has 16% of palm oil demand and Europe 9%. However, in the [indexmundi.com](http://indexmundi.com) web page Europe is placed as the first consumer of industrial palm oil followed by Indonesia, Malaysia, China and Thailand.

<sup>10</sup> Racism is present not only in institutions such as schools, courts, congress, etc., but it is part of how non-Mayans are raised. Much of it is learned and reproduced without knowing it.

Guatemala is considered the fifth producer of palm oil in America. However, it is different from other countries in the region because it yields 7 tons of oil per hectare while the world average is only 3 to 4 tons of oil per hectare (Solano, 2009: 38). Moreover, the country was rated the ninth exporter of palm oil in the world and second in Latin America after Ecuador (Guereña & Zepeda, 2013: 14).



**Figure 2: African palm oil producing surface area in Guatemala (2003-2012).**

**Source: Guereña & Zepeda, 2013: 16; based on the national census of agriculture and livestock of Guatemala.**

African palm production per hectare in Guatemala has experienced a drastic increase, as it is shown in the graph above. In 2003, there were 31,185 ha in use related to it, and by 2012 this number is 110,000 ha. This means that the land used for African palm production has quadrupled. In this sense, the regions of Guatemala that were first affected by the plantations were the departments of Quetzaltenango, San Marcos, Suchitepéquez and Escuintla – the south the country.

The second, more aggressive wave of plantations targeted the following departments with greater presence of the *mayan-q'eqchi'* indigenous communities: Ixcán (the lowlands of El Quiché), Chisec, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Chahal and some parts of Cobán (lowlands of Alta Verapaz), Petén and Izabal – what a Guatemalan calls the

north of the country. The following map shows the lands that are being legalized for the palm plantations and the potential areas where more productivity can be obtained.



**Figure 3: Map of Guatemala showing existing palm plantations and potential areas**

**Source: Guereña & Zepeda, 2013: 16; based on Hurtado.**

The upper strip of areas in colour corresponds to the second wave of palm plantations where Petén and Alta Verapaz are the most affected, while the strip on the bottom corresponds to the first wave.

The history of the ownership of the land in the northern lowlands can be summarized in the following way. At first, the land was owned by the state. Secondly, groups of indigenous communities demanded right for these land, so the state gave collective land titles to the communities. Thirdly, the communities started to individualize their share of the land. This made it easier for cattle owners and other agro-industrial firms to grab the land from the indigenous communities<sup>11</sup>. This means that the pattern of land acquisition by the African palm business can be divided as follows: land purchased from livestock landlords and land purchased from indigenous communities (in violent as well as non-violent, or in other words in legal and illegal ways). To find palm plantations where there was once virgin forest is rare in Guatemala; however, gossip has it that drug

<sup>11</sup> Agro-industry business cannot buy land from the indigenous communities who have collective land titles.

dealers, palm firms, and cattle landlords sometimes pay indigenous peasants to set fires in the jungle, so they can later grow the crops or make landing tracks for the drugs.

With this picture in mind, it is time to discuss the agri-businesses behind the palm sector in Guatemala. Six identifiable corporations that have subsidiaries in the country dominate the market. They are distinct corporations but together they control the market. The following table (*Figure 4*) sums up some of the basic information about the companies concerned.

African Palm producer	Corporate alliances/group	Location in Guatemala
OLMECA	Agri-bussiness Hame – Olmeca Corporation	San Marcos, Quetzaltenango, Petén and Escuintla
INDESA	Maegli group, Palms for development, Oils and Fats	Izabal y Alta Verapaz
AGROCARIBE	AgroAmérica	Izabal
TIKINDUSTRIAS	Sugar cane plantations	Petén
PALMAS DEL IXCÁN	Green Earth Fuels (Carlyle group, Riverstone holdings and Goldman Sachs).	Petén, Alta Verapaz y El Quiché
NAISA	IDEALSA and Henkel	Petén

**Figure 4: Palm producers in Guatemala. Source: Solano (2009 and 2011) and Guereña & Zepeda (2013).**

From the table, it is possible to assert that the highest concentration of plantations relies on the northern territories of Guatemala. At least four of these palm producers were created by private Guatemalan investments (Olmeca, Indesa, Tikindustrias, Naisa) and the other two may have transnational capital, including from the U.S. and Europe (Agrocaribe and Palmas del Ixcán). The configuration of national businesses in Guatemala has its own dynamics since the elites have been acting as a block from colonial times.<sup>12</sup> For example, the names of Molina, Botrán, Maegli, Mueller, Kong, Vielman and

<sup>12</sup> For a good sociological and anthropological analysis of the kinship dynamics among the elite in Guatemala and how they reconfigure themselves with the introduction of new capital see the book: *Guatemala: Lineage and racism* by Marta Elena Casaus Arzú. She was part of the elite groups in question, but after the study she was expelled from its ranks.

Weissenberg (present among local agri-businesses) are all associated with important family groupings at least from the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Guatemala (Casaus, 2009).

The case of Palmas del Ixcán is interesting because in 2007 Green Earth Fuels<sup>13</sup> was supporting the company along with the World Bank and the Inter-American Bank for Development related to the production of green energy. However, in 2011 this organization withdrew its capital from the project. GREPALMA<sup>14</sup> claims, defending the Palmas del Ixcán's public image, that the reasons for leaving were connected to the economic crisis. Another point of view is that the organization may have seen trouble and conflict related to land tenure in its areas of intervention. Palma del Ixcán did not make a comment in this regard.

The US government recently excluded palm oil from the renewable fuels list limiting the incentives to governments; meaning that palm oil exports would have to pay higher customs taxes since they do not come from an environmental and socially friendly mode of production (El Observador, 2013; Guereño & Zepeda, 2013; Solano, 2013). Nevertheless, Palmas del Ixcán will keep exporting palm oil through international trading companies who are in the palm sector, such as Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland. These last two are present on the Asian palm oil market as well, exporting the product from Malaysia and Indonesia to Europe and North America (Cargill, 2015). It is worth mentioning that Palmas del Ixcán exported raw palm oil for the first time to the Netherlands in 2008. At around the same time, as mentioned before, came announcement of the construction of the large biofuel plant in Rotterdam (Guereño & Zepeda, 2013:17; Solano, 2009: 67).

By 2008, around 30% of the palm oil produced in Guatemala was for national consumption, while 61% is exported to Mexico and other Central American countries. The remainder, i.e. 9% goes to the Netherlands (Verité, 2014: 29). Subsidiaries of big transnational companies like Unilever, Colgate-Palmolive; Proctor & Gamble consume Guatemalan palm oil. The reason palm oil from Guatemala is largely not commercialized within the US is because the Central American Free Trade Agreement leaves duties in place on these products. On the other hand, Guatemala has an agreement with the

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<sup>13</sup> Green Earth Fuels has capital from the Carlyle group, which is one of the major players in biofuels in North America.

<sup>14</sup> The Guatemalan Palm Growers' Guild is an umbrella organization that agglomerates around 30 palm oil companies in Guatemala. Also, GREPALMA is part of the Coordination Committee of Agrarian, Commercial, Industrial and Financial Guild (CACIF) which is a hegemonic non-state actor from Guatemala that represents the conservative right in the business sector.

European Union where they can trade palm oil free of taxes. This means that Europe might become one of the main consumers of Guatemalan palm oil (Solano, 2013: 16).

### **Evictions and deceit**

Driven by the great promises of the market, Guatemalan palm oil businesses need land to grow the monoculture and harvest it. Once again, this situation is a case where enterprises try to acquire land by any means possible. Indigenous communities may end up dispossessed, having existed for a long time in an already vulnerable situation. Similar waves of dispossession took place many times throughout history in Guatemala, e.g. with the Catholic Church, the German coffee *haciendas*, the United Fruit Company (UFCO), livestock farmers, conservation areas, etc.

The Catholic Church had considerable power over peoples' lives and territories in Guatemala during the colonial times. In this exercise of power, the Church appropriated communal lands from the indigenous communities for themselves so they could cultivate crops like cotton and sugar cane (Luján, 1998). Moreover, after the independence of Guatemala, during the liberal reforms around 1871, the state took the lands of the Church and more lands from the indigenous communities in order to transform them into private property, ultimately giving them to foreigners, e.g. Germans coffee producers. The idea of the state behind this transaction was to attract white people to the country and thus change the composition of the population. Many Germans came to the country and started planting coffee using the *maya-q'eqchi'* indigenous population as their serfs (Cambranes, 1988).

At the beginning of the twentieth-century, President Manuel Estrada Cabrera, a liberal politician, gave land concessions to the UFCO to establish banana plantations. In addition, the Guatemalan state also gave in concession the building of the national railway to a US company that had strong links with the UFCO. As a result, the latter had vertical monopoly over the banana trade because it controlled the production and the distribution of the fruit. This was the third wave of dispossession of lands felt by the countryside in Guatemala, but the first with implications for national sovereignty. By 1952, president Jacob Arbenz cancelled the concessions of the UFCO in Guatemala and started giving land to the peasants in need of productive plots. The UFCO saw this as a direct threat. Both Allan Dulles, the director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and his brother, the Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had interests in this company. Citing concerns of the alleged growth of Soviet influence in Guatemala, the CIA planned the

operation “PBSUCCESS”. The outcome was a coup d’etat by General Castillo Armas and the conservative elite of the country supported by U.S. intelligence (Chapman, 2005; Gleijeses, 1991; Schlesinger & Kinzer, 1985). Peasants and indigenous communities were expropriated once again of their lands. Landlords were favored because they were focusing on raising cattle.

As depicted in historical terms, evictions have been a common strategy for various agents with the help of the State. Evictions are a legal practice in Guatemala because, in the year 1996, the legislation related to them changed and stated that land conflicts should be solved by criminal procedure and not by civil law. In spite of the presence of the national police authorities, sometimes the owners of businesses finance the evictions and their private security teams are also present with firearms.<sup>15</sup> The businessmen provide transportation, food and shelter to the policemen because it is in their convenience that the authorities evict the indigenous communities.

In the municipality of Sayaxché, Petén the population by 2008 was 63,372 persons, living in 170 communities. According to Hurtado & Sánchez, by 2010 the population increased to 66,867 persons distributed in 166 communities (2011: 12). These communities were situated where there are now African palm plantations belonging to Reforestadora de Palma S.A. (REPSA) and Palmas del Ixcán – the first one part of the Olmeca group, and the latter having connections with transnational capital. This means that at least four indigenous communities might have disappeared due to the expansion of African palm plantations. The media does not always cover the evictions since these decisions occur at a high level and actions take place in communities far away from the city centers, making it difficult to be there, on site, and to get the information out.<sup>16</sup>

Some African palm companies also use other ways to acquire the land from the indigenous communities. “Coyotes” are intermediaries that the palm oil companies use to threaten and deceive the indigenous communities (Hurtado & Sanchez, 2011: 17-19), as local proxies of the company. These people speak the Mayan language and they might be from the communities themselves. They go to the families and start a discussion of the

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<sup>15</sup> A paradigmatic case is that of the evictions in the Polochic Valley. This was a massive eviction of 733 mayan-q’eqchi’ families (13 communities) that lasted for three days. This region is monopolized by African palm and sugar cane plantations and the Widmann family, the owner of the agri-business. The plantations use various means to kick-out the maya-q’eqchi population – some observers even draw connections to the mysterious death of Antonio Beb Ac, a farm worker (OHCHR, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> This is also the case in Colombia where in 2012 the Office of the Attorney General indicted 19 palm oil companies because along with paramilitary groups they displaced communities in the Curvado region (Kinosian, 2012).

price of the land. The “coyotes” typically do not pay the true value of the land: they may pay as little as 60,000 Quetzales<sup>17</sup> (qtz) for one hectare of land. Once it is bought, the cost may run up to 615,000 qtz for the same land.

The key element of the strategy is that the “coyotes” need only that one family be ready to sell their land. In this way, the community is already divided. A “domino effect” may begin. The company may work to reinforce this by excluding the families that have not sold their land from work on their plots (Estey, 2012). In parallel, the “coyote” continues negotiating the lands and may even threaten the leaders that do not want to sell. In the context of these communities it is not possible to argue that they are negotiating in equal conditions since there is violence or the threat thereof present, and the companies have the availability of resources such as lawyers and engineers. Additionally, the legal system is also working mostly in their favour (Alonso-Fradejas, 2011:11-12).

### **Job creation**

African palm producers claim that they create jobs by hiring the local population where the plantations are located (GREPALMA, 2015). With a view to this effect on employment it also needs to be considered that labor right violations are alleged to have taken place with regularity in the practices of these companies. The categories of people who receive money from the palm plantations are the following: a) permanent workers with contract; b) permanent workers without contract; c) temporary local workers; and d) temporary workers from other places (Hurtado & Sanchez, 2011: 24).

People from the communities are usually hired to do the hard labor like clear the weeds, fertilise the land, dig holes, and plant and carry the fruit of the palm. For this work, they are usually paid 50 qtz per day (five euros). The minimum wage in Guatemala, as of 2015, is 78 qtz per day for agricultural labor (Wage Indicator Foundation, 2015). Furthermore, if the plantation is in the harvest season or the palms require intensive fertilization, the workers sleep in the facilities and they receive between 30 qtz and 40 qtz with food and lodging subtracted from their wages. If a worker is absent from work, the day is not paid and he needs to pay 15 qtz for the food (Hurtado & Sanchez, 2011: 38-42).

It is worth mentioning again the role of the “coyote”, since these persons are in charge of hiring the palm workers, assigning them tasks, transporting them to the

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<sup>17</sup> Quetzal is the national currency in Guatemala. 1 euro = cca. 10 qtz (as of Spring 2016).

plantation – basically they are the ones who deal with the workers. When the “coyotes” pay the palm workers, they never receive a bill or a paper for their services (Hurtado & Sanchez, 2011: 29-32). In this way, the African palm producers never interact with the workers – just the proxy. This means that workers are not only being alienated from the value of their work, but from the employer organization itself.

The situation might get even worse because since 2010 some of the African palm producers are shifting from paying for “day to day” work to paying by “productivity”. According to Guereña & Zepeda, this means

“...a reduction in the unit pay per agricultural task and the intensification of work completed by workers over the course of a shift. In this policy, workers must work more to make the same income that they earned under the previous policy of ‘payment by the day.’” (2013, 68).

These working conditions have also affected the organizations of the *q’eqchi* households. In the territories concerned, there are three different types of households: 1) families that own land; 2) families that own land but have sold part of their land; and 3) families who have sold all their land. The last group of households has a hard time subsisting because the wage in the African palm plantations is not enough, in contrast with the first group that is able to produce on its own land and sell the surplus (Hurtado & Sanchez: 45-46). Women are especially affected because they need to work more, whilst men engage in alcoholism and prostitution, as they are the ones who receive the wage for their work.

The salary income that provides the African palm producers through the “coyotes” is not sufficient to meet basic food needs and it is even more difficult to finance health or education services from it (Guereña & Zepeda, 2013: 70). Labor rights are practically non-existent in the African palm plantations<sup>18</sup> of Guatemala and this in turn directly affects households.<sup>19</sup>

## **Ecocide**

The impact on the environment is probably the main reason why some people have started noticing African palm oil plantations. At issue is both what happens to the rainforest, and

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<sup>18</sup> Some of the African palm producers concerned, such as Tikindustrias, Palmas del Ixcán, among others, have a legal status of maquila in Guatemala. This means they are exempted of some taxes. The law was aimed at the textile industry so China could invest more in Guatemala, but nowadays other businesses misuse this legal status (Olmstead, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> The labor situation is not that different in Asian countries like Indonesia and Malaysia where African palm plantations even use child labor, and even forced and slave labor is widespread (Hill, 2014).

how aquatic bodies (mainly rivers) are affected. In Guatemala and in most parts of the world, the African palm producers claim that they produce on land that was used for livestock, so they have not cut down any rainforest. The article is not interested in reviewing this particular claim but will only discuss the impact on aquatic bodies through the narration of a specific case.

To exemplify the high level of impact the palm plantations have on the environment and, ultimately, on the social and economic factors of the livelihoods of the indigenous communities it is worth mentioning the case of el Río la Pasión. This river is the third most important aquatic body in the north of the country with a length of more than 300 kilometers. It later joins with the Usumacinta River that crosses into Mexico and flows into the Caribbean Sea. The river flows horizontally between the department of Alta Verapaz and the south of the department of Petén – specifically the municipality of Sayaxché. Both of these departments have a great presence of the main African palm producers.

The rainy season in Guatemala starts in mid-May. Petén and the lowlands of Alta Verapaz are covered by rainforests, so it is common that these departments receive successive days of non-stop rain. The palm producers' dig holes, called oxidation lagoons, in the ground (the size varies from that of a standard swimming pool to that of a soccer field) to mix chemicals for the fertilizers and the pesticides they use, or to capture waste from the oil mills. In May 2015 the rains were so heavy that these oxidation lagoons started spilling their contents into the surrounding areas. Through channels inside the plantations, the toxic spills then flowed into the Río la Pasión (Escalón, 2015).

The environmental tragedy was publicly noticed only in the first days of June when tons of dead fish appeared along the shorelines of the river. In short, the effects were: 1) an at least 150 km-long section of the river damaged; 2) between 13 to 17 communities directly affected (more than 12,000 persons) along with, indirectly, the whole department; 3) fish populations of at least 23 species identified by a government institution<sup>20</sup> decimated as a result of the toxic spill; and 4) the possibility that the river's ecosystem would never recover (el Periódico, 2015a; 2015b; 2015d; Barrios & Caubilla, 2015).

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<sup>20</sup> Six of these species are declared endangered species. Six other species have economic value for the communities. The estimated loss of fish is 79 million qtz, or cca. 8 million euros (Río Medios Independientes, 2015).

The company directly responsible for this ecological tragedy according to the local population is Reforestadora de Palma S.A. (REPSA). This company is a subsidiary of the biggest producer of palm oil in Guatemala – the Olmeca group. REPSA in April noticed that the level of water in its oxidation lagoons was rising and that a considerable number of dead fish had appeared in the surrounding plantations. They responded by sending water samples along with some of the dead fish to the laboratory of the National University. The results were that the fish died asphyxiated by the chemical known as malathion.<sup>21</sup> The media found out about these results in June 2015 (Escalón, 2015; Oronegro, 2015).

The company nevertheless denied that they were responsible for the condition of the river. GREPALMA and the Chamber of Agri-business said that each company is itself responsible for how it gets rid of its own waste. REPSA hired boats of the fishermen to collect the dead fish and bury them on the company's property – they were apparently interested in covering up the situation (Escalón, 2015; *el Periódico*, 2015b). At the same time the company was keeping close track of whom the people from the indigenous communities talked with. REPSA also mobilised their palm workers to support them (Río Medios Independientes, 2015).

Parallel to this, people from some of the communities concerned were protesting to the authorities about the situation. The mayor of Sayaxché tried to make a deal with the company itself, calling for the construction of storage pools for water and the development of a proper drainage system. The company agreed as long as the leaders of the communities signed a letter that acknowledges that REPSA was not responsible for the toxicity in the river (Río Medios Independientes, 2015; Oronegro, 2015).

At around this time, Guatemalan society was in upheaval. There were manifestations calling on Vice President Roxana Baldetti and President Otto Pérez Molina to leave office.<sup>22</sup> The news of what happened in the Río la Pasión area arrived to the city and people and the media started calling it an ecocide. In some of these social manifestations, there were people demanding justice for the river and the indigenous communities. This gave the strength to a judge in Petén to order the closing of the

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<sup>21</sup> Basically, this pesticide once in contact with the water starts draining the oxygen, and the riverine species that breathe in this water are suffocated. This chemical affects from the surface of the water to about 70 centimeters below, making it impossible for every living thing that needs oxygen to breathe. The chemical is prohibited in Europe but legal in the US and Guatemala.

<sup>22</sup> These manifestations were a key element to demonstrate that a part of civil society was supporting the legal procedures of institutions such as the Public Ministry and the Commission Against Impunity (CICIG) against corrupt functionaries.

company for 15 days. REPSA then refused to close and obeyed the law (elPeriódico, 2015c; Palacios, 2015).

In fact, REPSA ordered the palm workers to manifest themselves, in different places in Petén and in front of some institutions in Guatemala City proper. The palm workers claimed that if the company closes they will lose their jobs, and that this is not fair as they are going to be the ones affected. The situation got tense when Rogelio Lima Choc,<sup>23</sup> one of the first persons to denounce the effects of the company's operations on the river, was found dead in broad daylight in front of the courts of Sayaxché (elPeriódico, 2015a; elPeriódico, 2015d). Palm workers even kept three community leaders hostage. The Guatemalan State was ready to militarize the area if more social protests would have taken place (Río Medios Independientes, 2015; Torres-Rivas, 2015).

At the time of writing this, there is an ongoing investigation by the Public Ministry to assign responsibility for what happened and, presumably, the prosecution of REPSA may be in prospect. The state has declared the area a "red zone," and no one can now use the river's water. The national university is producing technical research papers on the impact of the malathion spill. There are international bodies such as the UN and several other organizations for human rights demanding that the Guatemalan state act on the situation. The toxicity of the river continues to spread to other geographical areas, affecting underground water aquifers as well.<sup>24</sup>

The indigenous communities for now do not have a place to fish, bathe, or play. Some expect that in a few years there might develop skin diseases, stomach intoxications and finally a higher rate of cancer among the population.

To sum up, the term "ecocide" was used not only with reference to the destruction of the natural ecosystem of the Río la Pasión. The term took on a social force within the Guatemalan population at the local and urban levels. The media played a part in creating the discourse of ecocide as well as its association to the wider social unrest due to the scandals of corruption in Guatemalan society. Ecocide came to symbolize the lack of control of the state over private companies. This kind of discourse was present in national newspapers and private radios (Emisoras Unidas, 2015), in the so-called alternative

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<sup>23</sup> Killed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September, he was a young teacher in the community of Champerico, which was affected by the toxicity of the river. He mobilized people to demand justice and he was elected one of the advisors of the major in Sayaxché – a position he could never take.

<sup>24</sup> This has happened in the Kuning River, Indonesia where an African palm mill released its waste into the aquatic body, killing a lot of fish (Green, 2007). Also, there were two cases in Colombia where a palm oil trading company spilled oil along the shoreline of the Caribbean – this is known from a Wikileaks-leaked cable document (Scoop, 2008).

independent newspapers (Redsag, 2015; Rivera, 2015; Ríos Medios Independientes, 2015; Pineda, 2015; Zavala, 2015) and even in the international media (BBC Mundo, 2015, World Rain Forest Movement, 2015). One particularly striking example is a conservative television presenter, effectively from a bourgeois segment of Guatemalan society, Amor de Paz, who claimed in her opinion column in the mainstream newspaper *Prensa Libre* that the company conglomerate *Grupo Hame* was responsible for the ecocide and demanded that all private businesses act according to the standards of corporate social responsibility. Such statements could not priorly be expected from similar sources.

The Ministry of Environment of Guatemala subsequently conducted a survey of the major rivers in Guatemala and pinpointed more than 50 diversions of the rivers by sugar cane and African palm businesses. This happened during the first months of 2016. The next step is to precisely geo-locate the diversions, identify the firms involved, and hold those implicated responsible (Contreras, 2016; CMI, 2016).

### **Conclusion: The certification of palm oil**

The article attempted to demonstrate that African palm oil has a life of its own given the interpretations different actors assign to it in its diverse forms (the plantations, the palm oil itself, the products derived from it, etc.). It strongly affects the social setting it is embedded in. As Appadurai remarks:

“...regimes of value, which does not imply that every act of commodity exchange presupposes a complete cultural sharing of assumptions, but rather the degree of value coherence may be highly variable from situation to situation, and from commodity to commodity.”(1986: 15).

This means that there exists a dialogue beyond economic interaction between actors through a commodity. So, the palm plantations and palm oil are not just sites of production and goods of the agri-business, respectively, but via interpretation, other actors, e.g. the indigenous communities, in fact also own these agro-commodities. This wider production setting ultimately has an effect on its surroundings: for example, the fragmentation of the sense of community in the population of the area.

To summarize the diversity of perspectives that inform the intersubjective context of palm oil production, *Figure 5* attempts to capture the basic interpretations there are:

Group	Perspective on African palm
Indigenous communities	Cause of losing their land; cause of the destruction of their environment; and an employment opportunity
Scholars	Cause of land re-concentration; destruction of the environment
Private agri-business of Guatemala	Modernization of agriculture; a source of profit
The Guatemalan state	Part of rural development
International agri-business	New markets and the development of new products
International consumers	Green energy and green products

**Figure 5: Conception of African palm by different groups.**

As can be seen above, the impact palm oil production has had in the indigenous *maya-q'eqchi'* communities of Guatemala has been negative at the structural (land), social (labour rights) and economic (environmental costs) levels.

However, the solution is not to stop consuming and producing palm oil, but to consume it and produce it in a more responsible way where the state can regulate the production and an international regime may regulate commercialization. As stated by Appadurai, "...demand is not a mechanical answer to the structure of production neither a never ending appetite. It is a complex social mechanism that mediates the long and short-term patterns of mercantile circulation (the author's translation, 1989: 59). This practically means that, beyond what Marx said, although producers – in this case palm producers – have power, the other half of this power is in the consumers' hands.

Palm oil certificates are an initiative by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the World Bank (WB) that aims to identify the companies in the supply chain (palm producers, oil producers, palm traders, etc.) that are respectful towards the environment and the social context. This "green" branding is part of a larger discourse of companies and organizations that follow guidelines to be sustainable in their production at both the environmental and social levels (in the latter case in the sense of offering products that are healthy for the consumers). This "green discourse" involves corporate as well as state functionaries. As such, regardless of the intentions behind the initiative, it can silence out the voice of the indigenous communities.

One may ask if the certification is aimed at securing and promoting good practices or just to convey an illusion to the consumers. Many of the companies qualifying as sustainable producers have been involved in scandals. At the end, as Appadurai states, "...politics (in the broad sense of relations, assumptions, and contests pertaining to power) is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities." (1986:70). The politics of palm oil thus connect what indigenous communities have to say to the green economic discourses of sustainability mentioned above even as, for now, this link remains to be discursively established (and institutionalized).

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