

Chapter 6: A war against nature

*In the Congo we have really been carrying on a war against nature.*¹

Lord Leverhulme to Max Horn, 15 February 1925

Introduction

Lever Brothers' ambition to turn the basin of the Kwilu river into a tropical utopia amounted to a process of rationalisation and standardisation. As the previous chapter demonstrated, HCB's paternalist policies attempted to mould the bodies of its workers according to its own norms and principles. Similarly, materialising Leverville also implied adapting its environment to the company's needs, a prospect which, in Lord Leverhulme's own words, added up to a "war against nature." The industrial production of palm oil would take the form of a rational triumph on the "unpredictable" Congolese ecosystems described at length by adventurers, missionaries and imperial pioneers (see chapter 1). This chapter focuses on how HCB agents waged this "war", studying the complex, sometimes convoluted and often frustrating attempts at "regulating" and appropriating the Leverville concession's environment. There is a focus on three specific examples, which taken together epitomize the company's multi-layered interventions impact on the Kwilu basin. First, I look at how the company managed to claim ownership of the region's most profuse palm groves through controversial legal constructions. Second, I shed light on the competition between indigenous communities and the company for the use of palm resources. Third, the chapter considers HCB's attempts at improving the concession's productivity through an ultimately unsuccessful plantation scheme.

The concession ecology

The *Huileries*' "war against nature" was tantamount to an attempt at refashioning the concession's ecology; that is, the complex relationships binding human communities with their habitat and the living organisms with which they coex-

¹ UA, LBC/230, Leverhulme to Max Horn, 15 February 1925.

ist.² Such endeavours were inseparable from the broader context of the accelerating global environmental transformations, emerging in the second half of the 19th century at the crossroads of imperialism and successive industrial revolutions.³ The expansion of capitalism outside of its historic cradle impacted climates and ecosystems alike and brought significant changes to the extraction, transformation and allocation of resources and lands in colonial frontiers.⁴ Increasing amounts of ores and crops, gathered by growing contingents of colonized workers, came to circulate on constantly expanding trade routes. In the interwar, the Kwilu palm oil industry competed with those from West Africa and Southeast Asia. This global contest pushed HCB to improve its comparatively low productivity and quality standards. These endeavours led in turn to profound changes in and around Leverville, impacting both landscapes and the distribution of resources between indigenous communities and the company. The concession's thirst for palm oil triggered new challenges for the Congolese who lived and worked there, and who also relied upon the *Elaeis* as a source of wood, fat, fibres and alcohol. Given that the region remained mostly shielded from capitalist encroachment until the inception of HCB in 1911, ecological transformations brought by the company were both rapid and brutal.

In Europe, colonial interventions in the environment were envisioned as an economic necessity and a moral duty, simultaneously ensuring the commodification of natural resources and the improvement of local populations' living conditions.⁵ However, colonial presence and influence profoundly disrupted the transmission of vernacular knowledge and cultural understanding of sub-Saharan environments.⁶ Existing land uses receded under the implementation of imported techniques of intensive agriculture.⁷ The complete disregard of Western experts, public servants and companies for indigenous uses and practices

2 Bruce Winterhalder, "Concepts in Historical Ecology: The View from Evolutionary Ecology", in *Historical Ecology: Cultural Knowledge and Changing Landscapes*, edited by Carole L. Crumley (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1994), 18.

3 William Beinart, Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

4 Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (London: Blackwell, 2004), 444–451.

5 Arun Agrawal, "The Politics of Development and Conservation: Legacies of Colonialism", *Peace & Change* 22:4 (1997): 466–467.

6 Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism. Literature, Animals, Environment* (London: Routledge, 2010), 2–4.

7 For a case study in Belgian Congo, see: Likaka, *Rural Society*.

often led to their swift replacement by so-called “rational” and “scientific” cropping.⁸

It is nevertheless striking to see that in the interwar Kwango district, such “modernising” efforts took a peculiar form. The forest galleries of the Kwilu basin did not come to host extensive standardised plantations before the mid-1930s. Throughout the first twenty years of Leverville’s existence, the company solely exploited *Elaeis* clusters already growing on the river banks. Most fruits were yielded in so-called “managed” palm groves. The concession’s forest galleries hosted extensive stands of trees, which covered hundreds of hectares but held a varying density of *Elaeis* (the most prolific did not count more than a hundred oil palms per hectare).⁹ To become properly exploitable by fruit cutters, the groves had to first be “managed,” which essentially meant they were cleared by the company’s workers. All trees and bushes were uprooted except oil palms, while young *Elaeis* trees were planted in the empty spaces left by the clearing.¹⁰

Given this specific form of resource extraction, the *Huileries* had to rely on indigenous skills and know-how to both exploit its key resources and improve its yields. Fruit cutters and their aides located the richest palm groves; eliminated parasitic vegetation; and harvested fruit clusters thanks to tree-climbing techniques acquired prior to their recruitment by HCB (see chapters 4 and 5). However, “managed” palm groves were also wielded by local communities, which led in turn to a stark competition for resources between the concession’s management and its inhabitants.

The exploitation of managed palm groves meant that the transformation of palm fruits into commodities partially occurred outside of the company’s grip, in zones which could only be imperfectly supervised by its sentries and messengers (see chapter 4). Anna Tsing conceptualized such liminal forms of capitalist exploitation as “salvage accumulation,” which amounted to the possibility of “amassing capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced.”¹¹ The concession’s palm groves could be understood as “pericapitalist” zones, which provided key resources valued in the global trade system, yet structurally eluded their full integration in standardised production

⁸ Joseph Morgan Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert. Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 42–45.

⁹ Edmond Leplae, *Le palmier à Huile en Afrique: Son Exploitation au Congo Belge et en Extrême-Orient* (Brussels: Falk & Fils, 1939), 7–8.

¹⁰ Nicolai, *Le Kwilu*, 283.

¹¹ Tsing, *The Mushroom*, 63.

schemes.¹² The pericapitalist character of the Kwilu river banks constituted a challenge for HCB. The yields and their quality were unpredictable, while its workforce could easily escape the company's oversight. The *Huileries'* "war" against nature equated to a struggle to limit this unpredictability as much as possible by securing land rights; imposing a monopoly on natural resources; and attempting to standardise both oil palms and palm oil. The complex obstacles the company faced in its efforts shed more light on the multifaceted impotence of colonial endeavours.

Owning the palm groves

At the edge of the Congolese rainforest, the basins of the Kwango and the Kwilu rivers were characterised by an intercalation of bushy savannah and dense, wet, subequatorial woods, surrounding its many water streams.¹³ The stark ecological contrast between the forest zones and dry marshes determined the socio-economic fate of the region. The savannah offered few opportunities for agriculture, and did not possess many valuable resources. To the contrary, forest galleries hosted large and dense palm groves, believed to count among the richest in the world.¹⁴

From 1911 on, the Kwilu basin was destined to become an "oil country," devoted to a single economic activity where workforce mobilisation and infrastructure building would be almost solely articulated around the extraction and export of palm oil. Efforts to develop other pastoral activities, or to cultivate alternative crops, were quickly abandoned by colonial authorities. For example, the Kwango district commissioner shared these words in a 1932 report: "there are only commercial opportunities for palm oil and kernels."¹⁵

Securing the right to tap into these resources was therefore of prime importance, both for the company and the colonial administration. However, the *Huileries* faced two major impediments. First, the palm groves coveted by HCB did not grow to be so lush on their own; rather, this growth resulted from the long-term intervention of indigenous communities. Oil palms' continuous exploitation and man-made improvement ran against the idea that the Kwilu *Elaeis* were neglected residues of primeval nature, readily exploitable by colonial capitalism. Second, the *Huileries'* plans to acquire exclusive rights to harvest fruits on

¹² Tsing, *The Mushroom*, 40.

¹³ Nicolăi, *Le Kwilu*, 68, 79.

¹⁴ UA, UAC 2/34/4/1/1, Diary of T.M Knox, 23 November 1924.

¹⁵ AAB, RA/CB 157, Rapport sur la situation de l'agriculture dans le district du Kwango, 1932.

lands already used by indigenous communities ran against the protection of “native lands” enshrined in Belgian Congo’s legislation. Tackling those issues required the building of a legal assemblage whose legitimacy was already questioned in the interwar.

One of the key aspects of colonial endeavours was to substitute existing arrangements on the allocation of territory and the division of resources by their own definitions of absolute, individual property rights.¹⁶ Various policies, legal dispositions and ad hoc strategies were implemented in the field to ensure the expropriation of indigenous populations from valuable lands.¹⁷ Since the times of the Free State, Congo laws distinguished three different types of land: 1) “native”; 2) “private”; and 3) “vacant.” On paper, native lands were protected against any form of colonial infringement. They were, however, restrictively delimited and only comprised villages and their surrounding fields, a space far smaller than the territories and resources local communities actually used.¹⁸ Legislators were keen on limiting indigenous occupation rights so as to avoid hampering prospective exploitations of yet-to-be discovered resources. A private land would be recognized as such once its would-be owner recorded its property claim in an official registry book.¹⁹ The rest of the colony was considered “vacant,” and the state bestowed upon itself the exclusive right to exploit its resources, both above and below ground.²⁰

With the inception of Belgian Congo, legal dispositions were redrafted so as to reflect the moral endeavours of the newly appointed colonial power. The separation between private, vacant and native lands was maintained, but the delimitation of the latter would now have to follow a thorough field investigation in order to prevent any “abusive” encroachment of indigenous rights. However, field administrators were reluctant to follow this new policy, which was also impeded by the colony’s lack of infrastructures. Public servants did not receive precise instructions on how to properly conduct enquiries leading to land delimitations. Furthermore, they lacked the time, means and human resources to

¹⁶ Bayly, *The Birth*, 434

¹⁷ Bayly, *The Birth*, 439.

¹⁸ Henriët, “Colonial Law,” 210.

¹⁹ Henriët, “Colonial Law,” 214.

²⁰ Piet Clement, “The Land Tenure System in the Congo, 1885–1960: Actors, Motivations, and Consequences,” in *Colonial Exploitation and Economic Development: the Belgian Congo and the Netherlands Indies Compared*, edited by Ewout Frankema and Frans Buelens (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013): 90.

conduct them. Even when boundaries were effectively set, they were rarely respected, for local communities regularly settled outside of their allotted lands.²¹

In the case of Leverville, determining whether the palm groves were “vacant” or “native” lands was controversial. All over the world, forest landscapes are shaped by geography, climate and the intervention of human and animals.²² In the Kwilu basin, both the intercalation of forest and savannah, along with the propagation of palm trees, were concomitant with and deeply related to the spreading of settlements.²³ The growth of forest galleries stretching along the region’s rivers directly resulted from centuries of human exploitation.²⁴ Humans and animals disseminated the seeds by eating and processing palm fruits, while *Elaeis* thrived on the slash-and-burn fields tended by local communities.²⁵ Furthermore, palm groves frequently had an abandoned village site at their centre.²⁶ Interwar agronomists knew about importance of human influence on the formation of palm groves. Edmond Leplae, director of the department of agriculture at the Ministry of Colonies between 1910 and 1933, noted,

The Blacks are the main agents of the spreading of palm seeds. [...] Each village harvested palm fruits, often in large amounts, extracted the oil and discarded the seeds in the bush. [...] The seeds gave birth to thousands of trees. [...] The native respected the *Elaeis*, which provided him with oil and wine. He did not cut them. The palm trees benefitted from the disappearance of large trees to thrive.²⁷

Inhabitants of the Leverville concession were both well aware of the importance of these resources for HCB and keen to defend their right to use them. As an administrative report on agricultural concessions noted in June 1920, “there are no commercially exploitable palm groves over which some natives won’t claim property, with even more vigour for often, elders of the tribe spent several years there, when they don’t claim to have planted the trees themselves.”²⁸ The legitimate property of *Elaeis* clusters also became a point of contention between Congolese elders and colonial agents, who protested that the former inflat-

²¹ Clement, “The Land Tenure,” 91–92.

²² Carole L. Crumley, “Historical Ecology: A Multidimensional Ecological Orientation,” in Crumley (ed.), *Historical Ecology*, 6.

²³ Oslisly, “Climatic and Cultural,” 4, 7.

²⁴ Nicolăi, *Le Kwilu*, 78.

²⁵ Alain Rival, Patrice Levang, *La Palme Des Controverses: Palmier à Huile et Développement* (Versailles: Quae, 2013), 24.

²⁶ Nicolăi, *Le Kwilu*, 285.

²⁷ AAB, AGRI 335, Les Huileries du Congo Belge, par Edmond Leplae, undated.

²⁸ AAB, AIMO 1403, Quelques reflexions à propos du nouveau régime des concessions, June 1920.

ed their ownership claims far beyond their effective uses, as mentioned in a February 1938 report on HCB circles:

If during the time when the HCB settled, natives did not immediately realize the interests of their rights on palm groves, their attention was quickly drawn to it. [...] Natives will not only entirely claim their rights, but also make excessive pretences, by trying to assert that their private rights extend to the entirety of natural palm groves, even unexploited, as well as the sub-spontaneous groves emerging from fallow in abandoned villages.²⁹

In HCB concessions, issues of land allocation were superficially settled by the 1911 convention (see chapter 1). Article 8 specifically noted, “before exerting its choice, the company could temporarily settle on lands unencumbered with third party rights.”³⁰ This meant, in principle, that the *Huileries* would have to recognize the concession’s inhabitants’ right to exclusively exploit the palm groves they already tended to prior to Leverville’s foundation. However, Lord Leverhulme disagreed with this policy and noted in November 1917, “behind and above all [...] there will always be the menace to the HCB of local interpenetration of native rights and I believe that the HCB can make the native more prosperous and bring within his reach a better system of living than the native can possibly achieve by any other means.”³¹

As early as September 1911, Sidney Edkins, the concession’s first area manager, asked the colony’s General Governor for instructions as to how the company should properly determine which plots of land were effectively unencumbered and how to prevent indigenous communities from impeding upon the company’s own chosen palm groves:

We are asking you to make us know or provide us with the practical means to determine the lands encumbered with third party rights as they existed when the convention was signed [...] It is certain that the natives will claim property over many natural palm groves when they will realize their increased value by our agricultural exploitation. [...] With the convention, we accepted many obligations destined to improve the material and moral conditions of the natives living around our posts. [...] To assume these charges, for the natives to enjoy as much as possible these advantages, we must rely on the just understanding of the rights acquired by each party, and it seems indispensable to us to determine them now.³²

29 AAB, AIMO 1404, Situation dans les cercles HCB, 9 February 1938.

30 “Projet de décret approuvant une convention conclue le 21 février 1911 entre le Gouvernement du Congo belge et la Société ‘Lever Brothers Limited’ et ayant pour objet la concession de terres à une société à constituer sous le nom de: “Société Anonyme des Huileries du Congo Belge,” in *Annales Parlementaires 1911*, Document parlementaire n°126.

31 UA, LBC/229, Lord Leverhulme to Max Horn, 6 November 1917.

32 AAB, AI 1468, Lettre de Sidney Edkins au GG Fuchs, 25 September 1911.

The impediments of delimitating these lands and the potential hampering of HCB's profits by the protection of "native rights" pushed its management to swiftly change its policy. In March 1912, Edkins directly demanded the suspension of "native rights" over the lands chosen by the company:

The issue of native rights in the concessions raises many difficulties: villages continuously change places and with them the lands cultivated by their inhabitants. Small groups of three or four huts burn hundreds of oil palms to plant a hectare of corn or manioc, and when they do not burn them, they harvest no more than a hundred fruit clusters a year. [...] It appears to us that the best solution would be not to recognize native rights on the lands we selected under the condition that our company could plant palm trees on their entirety and harvest all the palm fruits.³³

Belgian Congo's vice-General Governor nevertheless refused to grant such an exception to HCB. "I cannot satisfy your demand of seeing the government fail to recognize native rights on the lands chosen by your company. [...] Native rights to occupy lands is sacred throughout the colony and must be religiously applied."³⁴ In spite of the existence of a convention created to secure a smooth collaboration between the state and the *Huileries*, both parties found themselves in a legal and moral deadlock in the very first years of the concession's existence. This contradiction led to the elaboration of ad hoc legal dispositions, tailor made to accommodate the *Huileries'* needs while circumventing the spirit of Belgian Congo's land laws.

The colony's registrar of land titles suggested an initial way out of this stalemate as early as 1912. He proposed the auctioning of indigenous *sui generis* rights on land, to which HCB would effectively be the only bidder. According to the registrar, the "native village was a legal entity" whose commons were the collective property of its inhabitants. These rights were inalienable but could nonetheless be temporarily leased to a third party under the approval of the district commissioner, and allocated to the highest bidder in an auction. Per the registrar,

One of the most justified criticism made towards [HCB] is its desire to eliminate any possibility of competition. The opportunity provided to the village to temporarily alienate its rights in a public option [...] should suppress this criticism [...] There is no doubt that [HCB will try to] obtain this right. Whether it succeeds or not, it would only be at the benefit of the community.³⁵

³³ AAB, AI 1468, Lettre de Sidney Edkins au GG Fuchs, 22 March 1912.

³⁴ AAB, AI 1468, Lettre du vice-GG au Directeur des HCB, 23 May 1912.

³⁵ AAB, AI 1468, Note du conservateur des titres fonciers, 21 July 1912.

This proposal was nevertheless rejected by the General Governor, who found it excessively disadvantageous for the Congolese. The General Governor posed questions regarding the repercussions that might result from implementing this proposal: “Who will take the decision to authorize the natives to deprive themselves of their assets and to prevent themselves of any kind of oil trade? [...] What will the natives do, once they are deprived of their main trading activity?”³⁶

In 1934, it became clear for public servants that attempts at separating native lands from those of the company were doomed to fail. In January, the colony’s registrar conceded that the main obstacles to HCB’s territorial prospects resided “in the dissemination of native villages, for each small village is settled and cultivates lands as scattered as the villages themselves. [...] These plots of land used by the natives act as many nets of resistance against Europeans’ land occupation.” He concluded, somehow disabused,

[Natives] always demonstrated a profound antipathy, not to say hostility [towards land delimitation]. Native mores have barely changed, their agricultural and migratory uses stayed the same. Everybody knows that preliminary works performed by geometers were very expensive and were never followed by practical results. [...] Natives never respected these delimitations, [for they] parked them *ex abrupto* within territorial boundaries sometimes designated arbitrarily, this process must have profoundly vexed the natives’ spirit of freedom.³⁷

In spite of the difficulty of making local communities follow the land allocation envisioned by colonial power holders, jurists already found another way to circumvent the respect of indigenous land rights to ensure the *Huileries’* profitability: the tripartite agreements. Without theoretically infringing on the law, these arrangements were aimed at depriving indigenous communities of their rights over land at the company’s benefit. According to the 1911 convention, the colony pledged to lease up to 200,000 hectares to HCB in each of its five circles. The company had until May 1926 to determine which lands it wished to acquire. However, this plan never properly came to fruition because of multiple practical obstacles, such as the disregard of indigenous communities for these boundaries and the company’s limited means for determining to whom which land “belonged”.³⁸ In 1922, this original scheme was suspended and replaced by the drafting of those “tripartite agreements.”³⁹

³⁶ AAB, AI 1468 Note du GG Henry, 23 July 1912.

³⁷ AAB, AIMO 1652, Note concernant la délimitation des terres indigènes par le conservateur des titres fonciers, 23 January 1934.

³⁸ AAB, AIMO 1404, Note pour la 4^e direction générale du ministère des colonies, 12 May 1933.

These legal arrangements worked as such. A delegation made of surveyors, a representative of the territorial authority, designated chiefs assisted by a magistrate, and a representative of the HCB drafted a contract related to the use of land in a given area situated within an HCB circle. Together, they first delineated blocks of between 250 and 5,000 hectares in which the company intended to harvest palm fruits. Within these blocks, so-called “native” and “vacant” lands were determined with the agreement of all parties. Both types of land were then legally fused into joint ownership under the tutelage of the administration. The representative of the colony then allowed HCB to lease parts of these lands for their own benefits. Within these blocs, indigenous communities were allowed to settle “only under the company’s consent” (art. 4). HCB enjoyed the right of exclusive harvest of palm fruits for commercial purpose, while the local communities could continue to collect fruits and produce oil for their own consumption but were strictly forbidden to sell the fruits, kernels or oil to HCB competitors. They were also allowed to freely dispose of other products, such as rubber, ivory and copal.⁴⁰

Both HCB representatives and administrative agents were satisfied with the tripartites, which were renewed in 1938 and 1958.⁴¹ After the implementation of the tripartites, the company boasted in its 1922 annual report that the agreements were “a major event in the history of the company, maybe even in the evolution of the colony.”⁴² A note circulating in the ministry of colonies suggested that these new laws protected indigenous rights and uses. “Natives would keep on displacing as they wish except on the lands planted by the company or in the managed palm groves, but in those blocks, sufficient lands would be secured for their cultures.”⁴³

However, not everyone was satisfied with this new arrangement. An article published in the magazine *Notre Colonie* in April 1925 painted the tripartites as an infringement of freedom of trade and detrimental to indigenous communities:

Tripartite agreements are very complex and very clever. It is certain that they were drafted to safeguard the concessionary’s interests. [...] Serious objections can be raised regarding these contracts, both economically and legally speaking. HCB’s de facto monopoly, although opposed by several members of the colonial council, is duly extended, [in both space and time], [...] third parties are evicted from the region for another decade [...] Re-

39 AAB, AIMO 1404, Memo of meeting with Mr Franck on the subject of native rights, 20 April 1922.

40 AAB, AIMO 1404, Modèle de contrat tripartite, undated.

41 Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, 528, 533.

42 AAB, AGRI 335, Rapport annuel HCB, 1922–1923.

43 AAB, AIMO 1404, Note pour la 1e direction du ministère des colonies, 22 April 1922.

garding the natives, it is to be feared that [...] as the company enjoys a monopoly on palm oil trade, it would fix a buying price inferior to what could be achieved through free competition.⁴⁴

Other palm oil traders settled in the Kwilu basin saw their business significantly decrease in productivity in the years that followed the implementation of the tripartites.⁴⁵ HCB could eliminate competition by claiming rights onto blocs of land that were coveted by other palm oil producers, as underlined by a February 1938 report: “to prevent the settlement of any colonist, planter, trader or industrialist, the company only has to incorporate in a block of 250 hectares grossly determined the area coveted by the third party, and to choose this block at the time of the enquiry.”⁴⁶ When discussion began in Brussels on the renewal of the tripartite agreements, opposition arose even within the ranks of the colonial council—the deliberative organ in charge of formulating advices on every colonial legislation—who ultimately adopted it at a small majority.⁴⁷

Although the colony’s registrar of land titles failed to guarantee an HCB monopoly over land without seeing the administration overtly breaking the law in 1912, both parties found a way to conciliate their respective interests. Overtly complex and opaque, the tripartite agreements were enforced within both private and public spheres in spite of strong opposition of other colonial stakeholders. Their continued presence and enduring influence highlighted the difficulty of bridging the practical needs of colonial actors in the field with the moral standards that were supposed to preside over their deployment.

With the tripartite agreements, HCB managed to secure a relatively strong monopoly over land and palm oil production within its circles. However, the company still had to face another obstacle: local inhabitants’ autonomous uses of *Elaeis* and its many resources, which threatened the *Huileries*’ ambition to exclusively exploit its concession’s riches. Preventing such competition also required casting aside the virtuous ethos, which allegedly imbued the company’s activities.

⁴⁴ AAB, AIMO 1404, Extrait de la revue Notre Colonie, 21 April 1925.

⁴⁵ AAB, AIMO 1652, Lettre du commissaire de district du Kwango au gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 28 May 1926.

⁴⁶ AAB, AIMO 1404, Situation dans les cercles HCB, 9 February 1938.

⁴⁷ AAB, AIMO 1652, Contrats tripartites, in *La Libre Belgique*, 24 January 1939.

Competing for palm oil

Before the foundation of Leverville, palm oil was a key resource for the Congo basin's inhabitants. The oil and the flowers of palm fruits were staple ingredients of local cuisines, while the tree's wood and fibres were used in the making of tools and in building construction. Moreover, the fermented sap of *Elaeis* was turned into *malafu* (palm wine), the most frequently consumed spirit in the Kwango district. Calabashes of palm wine were frequently exchanged as gifts or payments and were key elements in the composition of bridewealth.⁴⁸ *Malafu* also had important medical applications. As noted by a colonial doctor in January 1935, "palm wine is used in the making of the most varied native drugs: infusions of barks, roots, leaves, some having special properties. [...] It is used to ease the ingestion of medicine, as purgatives or as [...] frictions against body pain."⁴⁹

The consumption of *malafu* raised both economic and moral issues for the authorities. First, making palm wine required significantly weakening or even killing the tree to collect its sap, which limited the resources available for oil companies. Furthermore, the making of wine was a more lucrative and immediately rewarding business than fruit cutting. General commissioner Wauters commented on trading *malafu*: "A *binda* (calabash) of palm oil is worth between two and five francs. Cutters are tempted to make wine instead of cutting fruit clusters."⁵⁰

Second, indigenous consumption of alcohol came to grips with colonial ideals of continence. Inebriation was considered as having two problematic consequences. First, it allegedly led to the "deliquescence" of Congolese mores. Second, it was thought to thoroughly impede upon indigenous workers' productivity. Edmond Leplae summed up their considerations in his undated history of HCB: "drunkenness is generalised and weakens the race, which becomes lazy, meek, unable to work properly. Days and night of drinking inevitably lead to orgies, brawls, murders. Some even fall down adult trees to harvest a few litres of wine and a couple hours of alcoholic insanity."⁵¹ Therefore, the administration tried to significantly curb the making and consumption of *malafu*.

In July 1923, the colony's general government attempted to enforce a decree forbidding its brewing. They issued a statement to this effect: "General Governor

48 Nicolai, *Le Kwilu*, 330–331.

49 AAB, AGRI 335, Le vin de palme, excipient à drogues indigènes, 2 January 1935.

50 AAB, AIMO 1652, Lettre du commissaire general Wauters au gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 18 March 1932.

51 AAB, AGRI 335, Les Huileries du Congo Belge, par Edmond Leplae, undated.

Lippens [...] raises attention on the need to react against the natives' tendency to fell palm trees to make palm wine. [...] He proposes to study the measures that would allow authorities to forbid such felling, but also to forbid or reduce as much as possible the making and consumption of palm wine."⁵² Functionaries followed the example of neighbouring colonies, Angola and French Equatorial Africa, where it was mandatory for Europeans to destroy calabashes attached to palm trees to collect the sap for making the wine and where the sale of wine was forbidden. The agricultural department of the colonial ministry subsequently advocated for a ban on felling palm trees extended to the entire colony. Nonetheless, field public servants realized the impracticality of such extreme measures:

There are regions in the Congo where the use of palm wine is so widespread that forbidding its making could not be entirely enforced without generating deep disturbances in native uses and probably foster troubles. [...] In the Kwango for instance, natives are almost permanently drunk on wine, and it has been noticed that their physical vigour is subsequently undermined. It would therefore be rational to limit palm wine consumption, but it can only be achieved gradually, in order to suppress it after a few years, a decade for instance.⁵³

If colonial authorities were bent on adapting indigenous mores and uses to their own moral frameworks, many administrators were well aware that such policies would better be enforced on an incremental basis. They feared that imposing an extreme and rapid series of transformations of habits and traditions would be counter-productive and pit the Congolese against the state without improving their "moral standing." An effective example of this cautious stance was the colonial authorities' approach to polygamy. Although the 1908 colonial charter (see chapter 1) contained a pledge to "fight" polygamy, policies implemented in the field attempted to discourage its practice rather than outrightly forbidding it. Many colonial actors feared that too extreme of an authoritarian approach to such a sensitive issue would disrupt the indigenous social fabric, and negatively impact Congo's already dwindling birth rates.⁵⁴

⁵² AAB, AGRI 335, Note au sujet d'un décret sur l'abattage des *Elaeis*, 24 July 1923.

⁵³ AAB, AGRI 335, Note au sujet d'un décret sur l'abattage des *Elaeis*, 24 July 1923.

⁵⁴ On polygamy in Belgian Congo, see: Amandine Lauro, "Le Législateur n'Envisage en l'Espèce que le Point de Vue Physiologique: Régulations du Mariage 'Indigène' et Politiques Sexuelles au Congo Belge," in *Le Contrôle des Femmes dans les Empires Coloniaux. Empires, Genre, et Biopolitiques*, edited by Martine Spensky (Paris: Karthala, 2015), 185–192, Nancy Rose Hunt, "Noise Over Camouflaged Polygamy, Colonial Morality Taxation, and a Woman-Naming Crisis in Belgian Africa," *Journal of African History* 32:3 (1991): 471–494.

The making of *malafu* was not the only issue raised by the competition between HCB and the Kwango communities for using the palm groves. The production of palm oil itself was bitterly contested. Inhabitants of Southwest Congo had their own ways of extracting oil out of palm fruits. Fruits were boiled for several hours, and the oil oozing at the surface was then progressively skimmed and set aside. Cooking residues were subsequently pounded and once more mixed with boiling water, which allowed for the collection of oleaginous residues. Until the early 1930s, this artisanal production was then either used for household consumption or sold to HCB.⁵⁵

In the late 1920s, it had already become increasingly clear that the company could not rely on artisanal-processed palm oil, which it considered to be of lower quality. The competition of Congolese palm oil with the standardised, high quality yields of Southeast Asian plantations required a significant improvement of the colony's palm oil output. From 1927 onwards, two business interest groups, the *Association des Intérêts Coloniaux* and the *Association Belge d'Agriculture tropicale et Subtropicale*, began petitioning the government to prevent indigenous communities from disposing of palm fruits.⁵⁶ They argued that the significant investments made to build and maintain industrial oil mills had to be protected against the competition of local communities, whose harvesting and production techniques entailed significant losses in quality and output. These business associations submitted two drafts of new legislation to the government, respectively in 1927 and 1928, to secure exclusive rights to exploit the palm groves for private companies. The explanatory statement of their first proposal underpinned their derogatory view of indigenous ways, as well as the discrepancy between Congolese uses of *Elaeis* and the needs of global markets: "Their extraction method by cooking or fermentation are empirical and defective, and extract from the fruit an oil of mediocre quality, far from the output that could be expected from the quality of the pulp."⁵⁷

Their first plan was rejected by the Ministry of Colonies, for it "violat[ed] the natives' freedom of trade" and "lack[ed] precision on the obligations of companies regarding native communities."⁵⁸ In response, business owners crafted a second draft, which they deemed more "respectful of the natives," for it "[did]

55 Nicolăi, *Le Kwilu*, 350.

56 AAB, AGRI 728, Lettre du secrétaire de l'Association Belge d'Agriculture Tropicale au premier ministre, 9 July 1928. Lettre du président de l'Association des Intérêts Coloniaux au Ministre des colonies, 4 October 1927.

57 AAB, AGRI 728, Exposé des motifs du projet de décret sur la protection des huileries mécaniques, 19 September 1927.

58 AAB, AGRI 728, Note pour la 8e direction du ministère des colonies, 27 October 1927.

not impede on their rights, their freedoms, their customs; their habit of producing oil through rudimentary processes for their own consumption.”⁵⁹ To strengthen their credibility, its authors underlined the input of key actors in the drafting of their proposal, including “Mr. General-director Leplae,” who “honoured us with his presence at our meetings and helped us with his wise advises,” as well as the provincial governors of Equateur and the Congo-Kasaï, who “gave us their tentative agreement on the essential clauses of our project.”⁶⁰

This second project was submitted to the colonial council in July 1930, but discussions were suspended in November at Edmond Leplae’s demand. In his eyes, the protection would impose the economic immobilisation of extensive lands, which was detrimental to the colony’s interests in times of economic crisis.⁶¹ Less than a year later, discussions resumed around a renewed disposition, destined to ensure the legal “protection of mechanical oil mills” and their owners. The decree divided palm oil production zones in two distinct areas: 1) “zone A, in which the mill owner is the only one authorized to buy fresh fruits and palm kernels”; and 2) “zone B, in which the government commits not to provide lands to its competitors to settle oil mills or plantations.”⁶²

The owner of such a zone would be granted an exclusive right for the economic exploitation of the trees growing on vacant lands, which could still be harvested by indigenous communities but only for their own consumption. Under the supervision of the provincial governor, zone owners were authorised to manage and transform the palm groves with the assent of local communities. Competitors who harvested fruits within these protected areas could be fined, and even condemned to penal servitude.⁶³

Once enforced, the decree led to disappointing results for palm oil businesses. First, in spite of a congruent law made to increase the production of standardised cash crops in the colony, the new decree paradoxically prevented the creation of oil palm plantations close to the oil mills. From 1933 on, the government also set up a program of compulsory cultivation. Officially speaking, this initia-

⁵⁹ AAB, AGRI 728, Lettre du secrétaire de l’Association Belge d’Agriculture Tropicale au premier ministre Jaspar, 9 July 1928.

⁶⁰ AAB, AGRI 728, Lettre du secrétaire de l’Association Belge d’Agriculture Tropicale au premier ministre Jaspar, 9 July 1928.

⁶¹ AAB, AGRI 99, Rapport du conseil colonial sur le projet de décret réalisant des mesures de protection pour les huileries mécaniques, 1933.

⁶² AAB, AGRI 728, Note sur le projet de décret accordant une protection aux huileries mécaniques, 1 October 1932.

⁶³ AAB, AGRI 99, Rapport du conseil colonial sur le projet de décret réalisant des mesures de protection pour les huileries mécaniques, 1933.

tive was driven by “the necessity to create and maintain food crops for the alimentation of local communities, and, in an educative objective, to create native resources by the cultivation of cash crops, alimentary goods and forest species for reforestation.”⁶⁴ On paper, *chefs médaillés* could evaluate their chieftaincy’s agricultural needs, which would serve as a blueprint to determine the nature and surface of the crops to be sown. In practice, however, these plans were set up in advance by the administration based on the suggestions made by the district’s agronomist.⁶⁵ Able-bodied men lacking permanent employment could be mobilized for compulsory cultivation in these fields or plantations for a maximum of 60 days a year.⁶⁶ If they refused, they risked having to pay a fine of up to 100 francs, and endure a week of penal servitude.⁶⁷

However, the decree on the protection of mechanical oil mills explicitly forbade all forms of infringement on the mill owner’s protected lands. In practice, this meant that the administration was not allowed to set up plantations where they were most needed. “We come to a paradox: no palm tree plantations where there are oil mills, no oil mills where there are palm trees plantations,”⁶⁸ noted a functionary of the Ministry of Colonies in 1936. Furthermore, there was no practical means for ensuring that local communities would not harvest palm fruits to sell them to the mill owner’s competitors.⁶⁹

Decrees on compulsory cultivation and on the protection of oil mills supplemented the tripartite agreements to further standardise the amount and quality of the colony’s outputs in palm oil. However, the *Huilleries* and other mill owners’ efforts to control *Elaeis* resources ran contrary to the “freedom” of indigenous communities guaranteed by Belgian Congo’s law. This tension led to lengthy negotiations between public and private actors, regarding the best way to accommodate the imperatives of *mise en valeur* with the virtuous guise of Belgian rule in Central Africa. In the end, public and private actors still manage to find a working agreement, at the crossroads of profits and morals. Preventing the production and consumption of *malafu* furthered the “civilisational improvement” of the Congolese while side-lining indigenous competitors for palm oil resources. Attempts at compulsory cultivation both responded to the alleged “atavistic idleness” of African men and improved the colony’s agricultural productivity.

64 AAB, AIMO 1856, Modèle d’arrêté sur les cultures obligatoires, undated.

65 Likaka, *Rural Society*, 47.

66 AAB, AIMO 1856, Modèle d’arrêté sur les cultures obligatoires, undated.

67 Ndaywel, *Nouvelle Histoire*, 363

68 AAB, AGRI 335, Application du décret sur les huilleries et plantations obligatoires de palmiers, 18 April 1936.

69 AAB, AGRI 736, Zones Huilières, 6 June 1946.

Even with these changes, laws, rules and decrees could only do so much to strengthen the grip of private actors on the palm groves. The practical enforcement of colonial decrees was proportional to the limited means of field public servants to impose their will in the field. The commodification of fruits growing in the groves was inherently unpredictable, which became increasingly problematic with the passage of time. In the early 1930s, when Southeast Asian palm oil came to flood global markets, it became clear that HCB's only chance of turning a profit resided in shifting from natural groves to standardised plantations as main purveyors of palm fruits.

Fruitless plantations

In early May 1933, the HCB general director signalled to the Belgian minister of colonies that his company envisioned a radical refashioning of its activities. He communicated this vision in a letter to the general director:

If we do not want the company to be forced into bankruptcy, we must completely reorganize our operations in Congo. [...] We must take swift measures to suppress some disadvantages regarding competing companies in other colonies [...] Congo's disadvantages regarding Sumatra and West Africa [...] can be summed up as follows. A lesser productivity from the Belgian Congo palm tree, resulting from the superiority of the selected oil palm on the wild one, [...] much higher transportation costs from the groves to the factory, caused by the scattering of natural palm groves, [...] social obligations in the form of medical services and schools.⁷⁰

As shown in this letter, the *Huilleries*' obsolete business model appeared to be increasingly unsustainable in the early 1930s. The company's dependence on naturally-growing fruits and on the unreliable output of forcibly recruited cutters were no match for the efficiency of the large scale, standardised *Elaeis* plantations of Southeast Asia. At this time, HCB was still following the extractive pattern set up by the Congo Free State's infamous rubber concessions. Furthermore, the propensity for violence that such an economic construction entailed was reined in by a series of costly paternalistic obligations, which also burdened the company's already fickle profitability (see chapter 1). It only took a few years for some colonial actors to realise the unsustainability of yesteryear's giant concession schemes. In 1921, a public servant of the Ministry of Colonies noted, "not one of these concessions has been properly exploited. [...] HCB is far from having selected all of its blocs and already fails to comply with its en-

⁷⁰ UA, UAC 2/36/1/11, HCB general director to minister of colonies Tschoffen, 1 May 1933.

gements regarding the valuation of the selected blocs. [...] There is no benefit anymore in delimiting large swaths of territory without prospecting first and without considering the capital one is disposed to invest.”⁷¹

The untenable competition from Southeast Asian palm oil was the final nail in the coffin for Leverville’s old business model. The shores of the Kwilu river could no longer remain on the fringes of capitalist encroachment, imperfectly supervised, unreliably harvested and inescapably shared with local communities. In the second half of the 1930s, the company took two main initiatives to safeguard its own existence. First, HCB worked hand in hand with public-funded agronomists to develop new breeds of oil palms. Second, its managers accelerated the development of plantations, destined to ultimately replace the groves as sources of palm oil. The *Huileries* envisioned the planting of 30,000 hectares of *Elaeis* in their five Congolese concessions in less than twenty years; this ambitious goal included planting 12,000 hectares in Leverville.⁷²

The plantations of Southeast Asia were not only a topic of anxiety for palm oil producers in Belgian Congo; they also served as a source of inspiration, which was mostly channelled through the Ministry of Colonies. The Belgian government’s agronomists participated in an international, closely-knitted network of experts in tropical agriculture and frequently travelled to Java, Ceylon and Sumatra to learn about the latest breakthroughs in colonial cash cropping.⁷³ These functionaries, working under the supervision of Edmond Leplae, were in turn advising private companies that were active in the Congo on how to improve their yields of cotton, palm oil or coffee. New cropping techniques, mostly inspired by Southeast Asian examples, were tried and tested in the colony’s agronomic stations, which were placed under the supervision of REPCO (*Régie des Plantations de la Colonie*).⁷⁴ Promising results were then shared with European planters, Congolese farmers and private companies. Out of the Congo’s fourteen agricultural stations active in 1931, two were dedicated to the development of new breeds of oil palms: Barumbu and Yangambi. Both stations were located in the Province Orientale in a rainforest ecosystem, which was markedly different from Leverville’s patchwork of grasslands and forest galleries.

REPCO agronomists first attempted to create new breeds of oil palms in Yangambi in 1922.⁷⁵ Their goal was to foster new types of fruit, which would produce

71 AAB, RF 1739, Note sur la concession de terre de la compagnie des Grands Lacs, 1921.

72 AAB, AGRI 736, Rapport annuel Huilever, 1953.

73 Hodge, *The Triumph*, 4.

74 Vellut, “Hégémonies en Construction,” 319.

75 Rival, Levang, “La Palme,” 28.

more pulp and would contain a smaller kernel.⁷⁶ From June 1924 onwards, REPCO began to provide palm seeds to private companies.⁷⁷ Furthermore, with the blessing of the colony's agricultural authorities, palm oil producers also bought seeds in Sumatra to start plantations in the Congo.⁷⁸

In 1933, REPCO was replaced by a new organization, INEAC (*Institut National pour l'Etude Agronomique du Congo Belge*). INEAC agronomists approached the colony's fledgling palm oil productivity in several ways. They studied *Elaeis* illnesses and parasites; attempted to manually pollinize *Elaeis* blossoms; and studied the optimal ways of refining palm oil and fertilizing *Elaeis* trees. More importantly, INEAC also organised a large-scale distribution of oil palm seeds to planters and private companies. In 1936 alone, it provided more than two million *Elaeis* seeds to its private partners.⁷⁹ HCB and INEAC participated in extensive collaboration, which led the company noting in 1935 that the inception of its plantation scheme had been "thoroughly eased by the works of INEAC."⁸⁰

Turning the Kwilu basin's forest galleries into plantations required further collaboration between the company and the administration. According to an undated report on the enforcement of the colony's 1933 decree on compulsory cultivation,

HCB already created plant nurseries, selected lands and trained agricultural supervisors (*moniteurs agricoles*) to start the plantations, if possible immediately after the dry season. The company counts on the administration's support to proceed to the clearing of the lands selected for the natives, and to organize the necessary propaganda in order for them to plant the selected cuttings put at their disposal.⁸¹

As with the harvesting of palm fruits in the groves (see chapter 4), setting up plantations in Leverville required the coerced participation of the local workforce. Preparing the land and planting the trees necessitated the mobilisation of men with the help of field administrators; supervision and training of these men was assured by Congolese *moniteurs agricoles*, who acted more as brutal foremen than as instructors. On paper, *moniteurs agricoles* were expected to

⁷⁶ Nicolaï, *Le Kwilu*, 293.

⁷⁷ AAB, AGRI 335, Lettre du secrétaire général du ministère des colonies au GG Rutten, 16 June 1924.

⁷⁸ AAB, AGRI 335, DG agriculture to company Palma, 30 April 1925.

⁷⁹ AAB, AGRI 399, Rapport annuel INEAC, 1936.

⁸⁰ RMCA, 54.85.183, L'industrie de l'huile de palme au Congo, par l'administrateur-délégué d'Huilever, 1935.

⁸¹ AAB, AIMO 1855, Instructions générales sur les modalités d'application du décret du 20 mai 1933, undated.

guide Congolese cultivators and to supervise their work. In practice, however, few had received any kind of agricultural training. They were mostly recruited among veterans of the *Force Publique* and were essentially hired to coercively stimulate production.⁸²

In 1934, HCB and the administration set up the guidelines of their collaboration for the realisation of the company's plantation scheme. Public agronomists would supervise land clearings, while HCB would provide stands of selected oil palms to be planted. However, the company struggled to fulfil its commitments. According to a 1934 report on agriculture in the Kwango district,

Mr. Van Hout, deputy agronomist [cleared] 586 hectares. If Mr Van Hout was unable to plant a single hectare, it is simply because HCB promised to provide plants that it did not possess [...] Kikwit zone: [...] on January 1st 1935, 300 hectares were cleared out and 50 were planted. It is also HCB's fault, for it could not give us more trees than those necessary to plant 50 hectares.⁸³

In spite of these issues, public servants and HCB representatives sought to work together on a new plan, which would further their respective interests. They wished to foster Congolese-owned plantations, "of which the natives would be owners and managers."⁸⁴ The idea was that if the company would provide local farmers with "selected seeds or plants, technical supervision, even financial help [...], it would furthermore accept to buy to the natives the fruits at a rate determined in agreement with them and the government."⁸⁵ The agronomists working for the Ministry of Colonies were enthusiastic about this possibility, as demonstrated in an internal note dated April 1936:

What do the companies want? To produce fruits, lots of cheap fruits, regularly provided. We offer that to them by ensuring that the natives plant valuable seeds (INEAC seeds) as close as possible from mechanical oil mills and places of economic evacuation. What is the native's interest? What he fails to understand today, but might realize tomorrow: being discharged of the immense, antisocial burden of exploiting natural palm groves, a practice as outdated as it is uneconomic. Palm trees plantations provide him with an important tonnage of fruits of which he can freely dispose, but that naturally, without any pressure whatsoever, he would be invited to sell to the closest honest trader, the owner of the oil zone.⁸⁶

⁸² Likaka, *Rural Society*, 50–51

⁸³ AAB, RA/CB 157, Rapport annuel sur la situation agricole du district du Kwango, 1934.

⁸⁴ AAB, AGRI 99, Lettre non signée au commissaire de province de Léopoldville, 29 September 1933.

⁸⁵ AAB, AGRI 99, Lettre non signée au commissaire de province de Léopoldville, 29 September 1933.

⁸⁶ AAB, AGRI 335, Note pour la 4^e direction générale du ministère des colonies, 20 April 1936.

This plan was not only seen in a positive light in Brussels; it was also welcomed by Leopoldville's general government as a way to move forward with the chiefdom regrouping scheme that the administration struggled to implement in the Kwango district (see chapter 3). In early 1934, the colony's General Governor suggested that these Congolese owned plantations could be populated by families grouped in accordance with their "ethnicity" and "racial affinities."⁸⁷ The company and administration worked together to devise a plan. They decided to begin by determining the lands on which these plantations could be set before dividing them into small plots, which would each be tended by a Congolese family.⁸⁸ In March of the same year, the first contracts were drafted, delimiting the mutual obligations of each partner. Families would be given five hectares of land and had the obligation to plant half a hectare on an annual basis with 50 selected oil palms provided by the company. Fruits had to be sold to the HCB at a government-fixed price, and farmers would be paid in accordance with the number of trees they planted and tended. If they proved to be negligent, the company would seize their parcel. Unruly tenants would be stripped of their rights and any compensation for their labour.⁸⁹

However, this scheme proved to be unpopular among members of local communities. The provincial authorities warned HCB managers that their will to ultimately remain owners of these plots and to potentially reclaim the lands of "disappointing" producers would render the plantation scheme unattractive for potential Congolese producers.⁹⁰ In March 1937, an inquiry showed that 31% of the farmers who settled there in November of the previous year had already left their parcel, while potential candidates who could replace them often refused to do so, arguing that they had no guaranteed rights over their outputs. One provincial authority noted, "We are currently powerless to prevent or limit this exodus, which seems to be an expression of the natives' aversion to imposed cultivation."⁹¹

Ultimately, the plantation program did not reap its expected benefits. In 1956, only 7,350 hectares of selected trees were planted in the Leverville conces-

⁸⁷ AAB, AIMO 1855, *Compte-rendu de la réunion concernant la mise en valeur des rives du Kwilu et de ses affluents*, 27 January 1934.

⁸⁸ AAB, AIMO 1855, *Lettre du Commissaire de district Vandevenne au commissaire de la province de Léopoldville*, 8 February 1934.

⁸⁹ AAB, AIMO 1855, *Contrat d'engagement de planteurs*, March 1934.

⁹⁰ AAB, AIMO 1856, *Lettre du Chef de Province de Léopoldville à l'Administrateur-délégué des HCB*, 5 May 1934.

⁹¹ AAB, AIMO 1856, *Lettre du Chef de Province A. De Beaufort au Gouverneur Général*, 30 April 1937.

sion, far from the goal of 12,000 set by the company twenty years before.⁹² Furthermore, the yields of these plantations were disappointing. The selected seeds sent by INEAC were bred in the rainforest in Yangambi and were ill-adapted to the Kwilu's ecosystem. The region's dry seasons slowed down the tree's growth, which limited their output in oil.⁹³

HCB's attempts at improving its production were multifaceted; their legal component, embodied by tripartite agreements and the decree on mechanical oil mills was accompanied by a rearticulation of its business model. The company's managers hoped to shift from palm groves to plantations as main sources of raw material. Standardised, supervised and "rationally" organised rows of selected oil palms were thought to bring an end to the unscalable, unpredictable character of extracting fruits naturally growing in the Kwilu basin's forest galleries. However, this radical move did not meet the ambitious goals set by the *Huileries*' management. Plantations were slow to take off, difficult to maintain, and brought disappointing harvests. HCB's plantation scheme shed further light on the difficulty to realize this colonial vision in practice.

Conclusion

HCB waged its "war against nature" on many fronts. They engaged in legal battles to circumvent the laws destined to protect a minimal access to land and resources to the colony's indigenous communities. They fought on behalf of the concession's palm groves to ascertain the company's standing in the exploitation of *Elaeis*. They targeted the unpredictability of managed palm groves by replacing naturally-growing trees with standardised, selected strains in an attempt to shift the company's reliance upon the former. Ultimately, the *Huileries* were engaged in a war of conquest, whose ultimate victory would have been to adapt the concession's ecology to its needs and demands. As with so many power-hungry entities across history, HCB won some battles but lost others. Tripartite agreements had thoroughly limited the competition for palm oil resources. At the same time, the company's plantation scheme did not turn the Kwilu's "pericapitalist" palm groves into overseeable, reliable fruit resources.

This final chapter sheds light on yet another guise of Leverville: a series of interventions on space and resources in an attempt to bring order to an ecosystem where colonial agents thought that chaos originally prevailed. The conces-

⁹² Nicolăi, *Le Kwilu*, 367.

⁹³ Nicolăi, *Le Kwilu*, 368–369.

sion was a physical unit, in which a plethora of groups and individuals competed for access to land and resources. It was a space where the *Huileries'* monopolistic endeavours clashed with the demands of indigenous communities and of the administration. It was a place for which complex and refined legal dispositions were tailored to bridge the gap between economic imperatives and moral principles. It was an environment where agronomic experiments were conducted on hundreds of hectares with disappointing outcomes. It was an ecosystem, which was radically transformed in the early 20th century by the global competition for palm oil resources.

According to Anna Tsing, capitalist modernisation relied on the belief that “everything on earth—and beyond—might be scalable.”⁹⁴ Investors, entrepreneurs and governments often fostered commodification schemes, resting on the belief that natural resources could be standardised, rationalised, improved through tests and trials. The contrasted outcomes of HCB’s “war against nature” testifies to the difficulty of constraining tropical ecosystems and their inhabitants to participate to colonial schemes of commodification. Although *Elaeis* was particularly suited for “scalable” production, Leverville’s management systematically struggled to move past its reliance on “unscalable” palm groves. The discrepancy between the strategies of spatial reordering devised by the company and the administration and its practical enforcement brings to the fore another aspect of colonial impotence. Agents of empire not only struggled to impose their will on human communities; they were also confronted by unruly environments.

94 Tsing, *The Mushroom*, 40.