



Land Grab and Oil Palm in Colombia

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Paper presented at the
International Conference on
**Global Land
Grabbing**
6-8 April 2011

Organised by the Land Deals Politics
Initiative (LDPI) in collaboration with the
Journal of Peasant Studies and hosted
by the Future Agricultures Consortium
at the Institute of Development
Studies, University of Sussex

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I have been able to write this article thanks to the year that I spent in Colombia working for La Fundación Hemera, a foundation that works to protect and reinforce the rights of indigenous and ethnic groups within Colombia, South America.

Following several visits to the department of Nariño I am able to write this report based on the honesty and belief shown in the oral testimonies I received. The observation mission to the department of Nariño (organised by environmental agency Censat Agua Viva in July 2009) visited Afro-Colombian communities in the regions of Bajo and Alto Mira, as well as indigenous organisations of the Awá nation in El Diviso, nominally, Comunidad de Peña Colorada, Bocas de Guabal, Bajo Mira y Frontera Candelilla, Vuelta de Candelilla, Bajo Pusbi, La Piñuela, Alto Mira y Frontera, El Diviso. As well as this we had meetings with various governmental entities at a regional and departmental level, as well corporations that work with the oil palm industry.

Summary

This article focuses on the effects of agrofuel production in the south-western department of Nariño, Colombia, as multinational firms cultivate palm oil on territories that legally belong to indigenous and ethnic groups. The two communities primarily affected are the Awá indigenous people and the Afro-Colombian population. Given the worldwide increase in demand for biofuels, foreign interest in agroindustrial production shows no sign of ceasing in its desire to exploit potential energy sources from countries in the geographical South, a move supported by central Colombian Government. The limitations and hazards of outgrower schemes have recently been exposed with the onslaught of bud rot, a fungus that has left vast quantities of oil palm in decay. This article suggests that the social, ecological, economic and political costs that this development inflicts on the area do not represent a sustainable nor ethically sound solution to a problem that must be solved with long term responses rather than myopic, plutocratic options. The uncomfortable neo-colonial undertones that accompany renewed international investment, as well as the lack of autonomy experienced by the autochthonous peoples of this region as a result of multinational company actions means that agrofuel production should be seriously rethought or discontinued in the region.

Introduction

Any passenger who arrives at the rudimentary airport of Tumaco, Colombia, and walks across the modest runway towards arrivals cannot fail to notice the reticent and yet striking presence of the grounded C27 planes. This gleaming squadron stands incongruously against the coastal backdrop, lush shrubbery and the greetings of the airport staff.

Driving through the streets of Tumaco provides a similarly jarring experience: the primarily Afro-Colombian community that lives in the area is interspersed with burly white men in aviators. Their presence disturbs and is notable given the relative geographical isolation of the town and the ethnic make-up of the department as a whole, not least its lack of attractions for tourists.

But for those who have passed through since 1998, the geo-politically strategic positioning of these metal birds of prey and those who control them is no longer novel. They represent an aid initiative that was conceived by former Colombian President Andrés Pastrana Arango, formally known as Plan Colombia; it is the same programme that continues to this day, and provides a continued North American stronghold within the country, both financially and politically.

From above, Nariño gives the impression of being an indomitable, bucolic region of the country; in actual fact the department has become a hotbed for economic activity through processing biomass. It is for this very reason that the U.S army is not the sole international presence felt, nor was it ever; given the department's position as a land and maritime border, its extensive area covering some 12,800 square miles and its climate, developers both internationally and internally have become interested in the potential economic output of the region¹.

Since the 1960s, this Pacific zone has been host to a range of businesses that produce agrofuel from 'African' palm oil. Nowadays, the following still operate there: Plamas de Tumaco, Palmeiras, Salamanca, Astorga, Santa Helena and Santa Fe, amongst others. According to figures obtained from the Regional and Autonomous Corporation of Nariño (Corponariño), effectively the Ministry of Agriculture at a localised level, there are approximately 35 000 hectares of palm planted in the department².

Ripe in potential it might have been, but the agricultural exploitation of the region has been anything but organic. With the support of federations encouraging and grouping palm growers such as Fedepalma, the former President of Colombia, Álvaro

¹ Figures from 2005 DANE census (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística)

² Corponariño stands for the Corporación Autónoma Regional de Nariño, for 2009, figures given in a meeting with them, July '09.

Uribe, dogmatically propelled the growth of oil palms (*Elaeis Guineensis*), making it part of the national agenda³,

I would ask you (the Minister of Agriculture) to quarantine the businessmen of Tumaco and their Afro-descendent compatriots and not let them leave the office, it must be an office where you can lock them up until they reach an agreement. It has to be like this, especially if it is through perseverance that is has to be done . . . Lock them up there and propose the following to them, that the State [of Colombia] will provide for them, that they should reach an agreement about the use of the land and the Government will contribute capital and eliminate risk. Give them a date and say to them: men, this is a meeting and we are not to adjourn until we reach an agreement . . . Because we have to recognise the good and the bad here, in Meta and Casanare [two other Colombian departments] as well as in Guaviare there are a few formidable palm plantations, but in Tumaco there is nothing. And Tumaco has a road, and then think about the area north of there too, in the area of Guapi [a coastal town north of Tumaco], in El Charco which has excellent conditions and yet does not grow a single oil palm, but is instead smothered by the coca plant that we must eradicate⁴.

The above is exemplary of Uribe's rhetoric – colloquial and abrasive – and the below illustrates the fervour with which he encouraged the production of agrofuels during his Presidency (2002-2010) during which time the human rights record of Colombia was often overlooked in favour of increased economic growth⁵,

I have said to the palm growers: there are regions in Colombia that hold the immediate alternative: biofuels, agrofuels, almost exclusively the only solution we have, given the condition of the soil, the sea level, rainfall, etc. Colombia must advance more quickly in the development of its biotechnology. I hope that we can. What often happens is that Government turnover is very quick and processes tend to be very slow. I have recently been speaking about the change in speed, of a sense of urgency. The whole superstructure must be changed in order to change the speed of things, to work to produce results, with a sense of urgency⁶.

This 'sense of urgency' translates itself even in the figures surrounding the growth of the agroindustrial sector. If Uribe spoke these words in 2006, then they masked the truth of the situation, which was that the wheels were already firmly in motion. In 2001, at a national level there were 161 210 hectares of 'African' oil palm planted, whereas in 2005 the figure had increased to 275 317 hectares, that is to say Colombia had undergone a 41.4% increase in growth in just under four years⁷. In the Tumaco area alone, in 2005, the total production of crude palm oil increased by 6.5%, similar to the national increase (6.7%), but superior to the increase in the north and east regions.

³ Fedepalma stands for La Federación Nacional de Cultivadores de Palma de Aceite

⁴ Words of the Ex President Álvaro Uribe, at the XXXIV Fedepalma Congress, www.fedepalma.org/documentos/2006/congreso_a_uribe.doc

⁵ In his 2009 report, Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples for the United Nations James Anaya called the current situation 'grave, critical and profoundly preoccupying'.

⁶ http://www.presidencia.gov.co/prensa_new/sne/2006/agosto/09/19092006.htm

⁷ Figures on this page from CORPOICA (Corporación Colombiana de Investigación Agropecuaria) unless otherwise indicated.

This report does not deny the considerable quantity of opportunities that were generated by such a rapid expansion of the industry. In 2005, the cultivation of African oil palm generated around 7000 jobs directly, and 3500 further jobs indirectly in the Tumaco area. Approximately 44 000 people are dependent on the agricultural industry, a substantial figure given the total population in the municipality is 160 000. This is often cited as one of the principal benefits of outgrower schemes and one that cannot be denied by this article.

However, when we consider the current political ecology of the land, the presence of these multinational firms should be as palpable as the North Americans with their tinted sunglasses, as should their culpability. There is indeed another parallel that we can draw between Plan Colombia and 'African' oil palm monoculture: the money poured into the country through the former, as well as that generated via the latter, is an indictment of, and simultaneously symptomatic of, twenty-first century foreign intervention through investment in a developing country. It is a response to the need for Northern countries to alter the resources they exploit for their energy, thus exposing the agrofuel industry for what it has come to be: a finite, plutocratic and short-term solution to development masquerading as an ethically and environmentally beneficial model. Like Plan Colombia the cultivation of palm oil was also meant to obstruct that of coca, in fact, 20% of the USAID crop-substitution budget for Colombia is spent on oil palm projects⁸. Instead both schemes have revealed themselves to have a variety of shortfalls, and of furthering a particular sort of international presence in a supposedly postcolonial, post-imperialist Colombia.

To worsen matters, the onslaught of bud rot on the oil palm has rendered many of the plantations completely unprofitable. Sadly, few can recognise any viable alternatives despite the crisis. The palms are fruitless; from Tumaco all the way to Alto y Bajo Mira many of the multinational corporations have abandoned their cultivations whilst no profit can be made and a supposed 'solution' to the epidemic is found. The scale of the impact made by this particular plague has been biblical: according to the local Government of Nariño 60-70% of all oil palms in the region are infected with bud rot⁹.

Therefore, the cultivation of oil palm is not the positive foreign investment that many of the multinationals claim it to be, but instead is ultimately placing local communities in a situation whereby the environment and political situation of Colombia will not improve until the central Colombian Government shifts the fulcrum of their interests.

This article does not wish to give a chronological history of either Plan Colombia or the growth of the 'African' oil palm, but rather to analyse how the monoculture of the latter in south-western Colombia is neither sustainable nor equitable. More than

⁸ Otis, John, *Tree Oil Plan Tries to Bear Fruit*, Houston Chronicle, February 6, 2005.

⁹ Figures given in person, July '09, from the local Government of Nariño.

simply a panicked response to global warming, the domination of the South for energy resources constitutes a modern form of 'land grab' – understood in this case as an aggressive taking of land in order to expand and broaden territory and power – from two ethnic minorities, both of whom place a special emphasis on their affiliation with ancestral territories.

This study will also consider arguments offered by critics as to the working relationship fostered between black workers and their white counterparts, not ignoring that many of those who are subcontracted to control the plantations are *mestizo* in origin, but always bearing in mind that many of the firms are multinationals, whose locus of interest is Eurocentric. This study will also consider the assertion made by PCN (Proceso de Comunidades Negras) member Hernán Cortés that government and the palm companies have created the associations to undermine Afro-Colombian communities' sovereignty over their lands, which they gained collective title to in 1993 with the passing of Law 70. It is in this way that we will consider the psychological effect of these land grabbing techniques.

Nariño's African palms

Ever since the sixties, those who live in the Nariño region have been producing alternative forms of energy – agrofuels – by collecting the fruits that ‘African’ oil palm yield. The oil palm can only be grown in warm, humid climates in lands that lie 500 metres below sea level. Given that Nariño is an area characterised by high temperatures, abundant rainfall and plentiful vegetation, it was thought to be an ideal location for palm oil production. The seed was originally brought over from the Guinean coast of West Africa, accounting for its scientific name *Elaeis Guineensis Jacq*, and its more common name, ‘African’ oil palm.

The Nariño area can be divided into three distinct regions: the Pacific planes, the Andean region and the Amazon rainforest (see typical mountainous landscape photograph on following page). According to a 2005 national census, there are 1 531 777 habitants in the department. The ethnic population within the region is notable: where nationally indigenous and Afro-Colombian citizens make up 3.4% and 10.5% of the population respectively, in Nariño these figures are 10.8% and 18.8%.

The main indigenous group is the Awá nation, which translates as ‘people’, also known as the Kwaiker people. They themselves often place the word ‘Inkal’ in front of their name which means ‘mountain’; together ‘Inkal Awá’ means people of the mountain. They speak the Awá language which is related to the Chibcha linguistic family.

They live across an extensive area of the Western Andean region of Colombia in the municipalities of Ricaurte, Barbacoas and Tumaco. Their territory stretches from the Telembí River all the way to the north of Ecuador, where other Awá communities also live. Although their traditional territory is larger, the one that they occupy at this moment in time is some 300 000 hectares of tropical forest, of which 250 000 are recognised indigenous reserves, according to the 1991 Political Constitution of Colombia. The Awá population totals some 25 000, of which 22 000 live in Colombia and the rest in Ecuador¹⁰. They have two organisations that represent them: the UNIPA (La Unidad Indígena del Pueblo Awá) and CAMAWÁRI (Cabildo Mayor Awá de Ricaurte). They too, like the Afro-Colombian population, are involved in the production of palm oil.

The oil palm itself was brought over to the Americas following the colonial and commercial actions of the past, and was used as part of the diet of many of the slaves when planted in American soils upon arrival.

The National Federation for the Growers of Oil Palm, Fedepalma was established in 1962. In their literature they claim that although oil palm was introduced to the Americas at the time of colonisation, it was in 1932, thanks to Florentino Claes, that it was introduced to Colombia. It was apparently sowed for ornamental purposes in

¹⁰ Figures from UNIPA distributed resources, during the Minga of March '09.

the Agrícola de Palmira Station in the Valle del Cauca department. The commercial cultivation on the plant began in 1945, when the United Fruit Company established a plantation in the banana zone in the department of Magdalena¹¹.

The palm can now be found in the following national departments.

- North: Magdalena, Norte del Cesar, Atlántico, Guajira
- Central: Santander, Norte de Santander, Sur del Cesar, Bolívar
- East: Meta, Cundinamarca, Casanare, Caquetá
- West: Nariño



Since the 1960s, the Pacific zone of the department of Nariño has been populated by palm growing businesses. As well as this, there are 7 extractor plants, more often than not operated by the aforementioned multinationals. The initial

intention, again, according to information produced by Fedepalma, was to develop farmland and produce palm oil for local use alone. During the 'eighties the number of hectares devoted to oil palm increased and by the 'nineties the competitiveness of the companies was reviewed to meet international demand.

As is to be expected, the difference of opinion as to how and why palm arrived and grew in the region is vast. To contrast the more agreeable picture painted by that of Fedepalma, according to Hernán Cortes, of the Afro-Colombian advocacy group PCN (Proceso de Comunidades Negras) the palm arrived in Nariño at gunpoint in the 'eighties, when the Cali drug cartel, together with local politicians and the businessmen, sought to establish plantations as a way of laundering drug money.

International context

Palm oil has become increasingly popular internationally as a non-carbon emitting fuel that can replace fossil fuels. The Colombian Government have endeavoured to cash in on this niche in the market. *Censat Agua Viva*, a Colombian environmental

¹¹ Facts and figures from www.fedepalma.org and their publication *La Agricultura de Palma de Aceite en Colombia*, published (Bogotá: Fedepalma, 2006).

agency, have calculated that between 2002 and 2030 worldwide energy consumption will increase by 60%, which could explain why the replenishing and diversification of energy sources has become a profiteers game. Colombia, together with Indonesia, India and Malaysia has made a conscious effort to enter into this lucrative market. As demonstrated in previously mentioned figures this has been no half measure: Colombia is the chief producer in Latin America, and the fourth largest globally¹².

A European Union directive, prompted by the desire for greater energy security, as well as the requirements of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, set the goal of obtaining 5.75 % of transportation fuel needs from biofuels by 2010 in all member states¹³. In February 2006, the EU also adopted an ambitious *Strategy for Biofuels* scheme with a range of potential market-based, legislative and research measures to increase the production and use of biofuels. Germany and France, in particular, have announced plans to rapidly expand both ethanol and biodiesel production, with the aim of reaching the EU targets before the deadline.

We should now consider how Colombia has gone about bridging the gap between producing palm oil for local consumption alone, to becoming one of the world's largest providers and has managed to regulate land tenure to do so. This in turn has transformed relationships between those who live on the land, those who take profit from it, thereby setting up an outgrower, contract farming model that has revolutionised life in south-western Colombia.

¹² Figures and information from Censat Agua Viva's conference *Agrocombustibles, beneficio para quién?* held in Bogotá, July 2009.

¹³ Worldwatch Institute, *Biofuels for Transport - potential and implications for sustainable energy and agriculture* (London: Worldwatch Institute, 2007), p.233.

Liberal law to conservative pragmatism

Contrary to what the above title might imply, this section does not wish to suggest that the plethora of legislature that came to be passed under the Liberal parties extended reign in Colombia (1986-1998) has been sequentially undermined by the Presidents that have followed. Indeed, what we cannot help but notice is that much that has been said about Colombia post-*La Violencia* makes itself evident when we consider the growth of the palm oil industry in Nariño.

The undeclared civil war that began in Colombia from 1948 following the assassination of the Liberal and populist movement leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, commonly known as *La Violencia*, imbued the country with a deep-seated trauma that would dog the optimism of the heady sixties. Between 80 000 - 400 000 are estimated to have died in a war where killing became ritualistic to the point of being creative and whose culmination is still being debated to this day¹⁴.

The immediate post-*Violencia* period can be analysed as a moment of stasis in which the political elite instigated the *Frente Nacional* (1958-1974) – a symbiotic rotating government between the only two legitimate political parties, Liberal and Conservative to prevent any return to the atrocious levels of violence and suppression that had been experienced. Although the conflict *was* fought with an even larger popular presence than the celebrated Mexican Revolution, it concluded in a return of the conservatism that had always prevailed¹⁵.

Colombia did not experience –nor has it ever– a prolonged and effectual social revolution, through which most Latin American countries, and their oppressed, have established a contestatory voice. The *Frente Nacional* was handed the guise of an outward pacification; instead, it was a strategic gesture of solidarity between the two legitimate plutocratic parties. For the poorest and majority of Colombians this bipartisan amalgamation meant nothing. For others it was political treachery and it also meant the gagging of any viable political alternative as they were made illegal.

Whilst we should not solely attribute the gravity of the current situation to a lack of social revolution or the ‘deletion of the past’ carried out by the *Frente Nacional*, the spirit of these marked shifts in political dynamic are still felt in the country’s zeitgeist¹⁶. According to sociologist William Ospina the *Frente Nacional* never represented modern Colombia and continued,

*[...] without a territorial project, without a sensible and particular development plan, without an accord taking advantage of its resources*¹⁷.

¹⁴ Palacios, Marco *Colombia: fragmented land, divided society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.345.

¹⁵ Ospina, William *¿Dónde está la franja amarilla?* (Bogotá, Grupo Editorial Norma, 1997).

¹⁶ Pécaut, Daniel, *Elementos de reflexión: Violencia y Política en Colombia* (Medellín: Hombre Nuevo Editores, 2003).

¹⁷ Ospina, William, *Lo que se gesta en Colombia* (Medellín: Dann Regional 2001).

As the powers that be orientated their politics in favour of the accumulation of capital, and the legacy of the clientalism and sclerotic system engendered by the *Frente Nacional* left its scar on the political agenda, Colombia moved towards what Palacios calls the *Interregnum*, a state unable to cope with its own powerful centrifugal forces, as the masses moved to the cities, forming renowned vicar turned guerrilla Camilo Torres' urban proletariat.

For those who remained in the countryside there was the increased intensity of the narcotics trade to contend with, but this was, initially, less dramatically realised in Nariño as it was in other areas of Colombia. Before we assess just how strongly the clientalism can still be felt today amongst the outgrowers and contract farmers of the twenty-first century, let us first understand how these development strategies have become possible. Much legislature was passed during the extended rule of Colombian Liberal Presidents, from 1986-1998, that directly benefitted members of ethnic communities. The first to be signed was the ILO's (International Labour Organisation) Convention 169 (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Convention); it emphasises the human and fundamental rights that should be applied indiscriminately to all indigenous and tribal peoples. In 1991, a new Constitution was passed and renamed the 'Constitution of Rights', replacing the last version passed in 1886. This document directly refers to indigenous and black peoples in a number of its articles. Afro-Colombians were to be further recognised in Law 70, passed in 1993, under former President César Gaviria Trujillo, and titled 'In Recognition of the Right of Black Colombians to Collectively Own and Occupy their Ancestral Lands'.

In almost all communiqués issued by Colombian organisations protecting either indigenous or black communities, if the content is one of distress, it will inevitably mention one of the three crucial recognitions of the rights of marginalised groups, often referencing the 2007 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples too. To analyse them all is not within the remit of this article, but the overarching focus is on land occupancy, and the titles and recognition of land tenure: indigenous 'reserves' are similar to 'Black Communities' in the eyes of the laws in that it is stipulated that the groups receiving collective title will continue to maintain, preserve, and favour the land, whilst simultaneously practicing their traditional lifestyle guided by their own idiosyncratic cosmovisions. As this article will go on to show, these titles have on occasions been adhered to, but also flagrantly ignored by a number of public and private entities.

The recognition mentioned above is not to be ignored. Law 70 is one of the most celebrated in Latin America for the direct rights it empowers black communities with in Colombia. It is important, additionally, to highlight that both Law 70 and the 1991 Constitution permit the collaboration of communities with external parties, as long as they comply with the administrative entity of natural and renewable resources. Article 57 of the aforementioned Law 70 best synthesises the intentions of this potential development model,

The National Government will create a commission to study and to formulate a developmental plan for the Black Communities. This commission will begin to operate once the President of the Republic is elected and with the approval of the National Development Plan CONPES. That plan will propose long-term policies and will become the frame of reference so that policies of the National Development Plan respect the ethnic diversity of the Nation and promote the sustainable development of those communities in accordance with their own vision. This will be a technical commission with ample knowledge of the realities of the Black Communities. And, in order to create it, the proposals of the Black Communities will be taken into account. The Department of National Planning will be responsible for financing the expenses for its proper functioning.

By ‘collaborating’ with multinationals, the idea of the outgrower model is that Afro-Colombians can cultivate their lands profitably, benefitting the country and local residents economically whilst indirectly contributing to a sustainable future in terms of renewable energy use and satisfying demand. The outgrower system, rather than being a fair trade model, more closely follows a free trade model in its use of cooperatives and direct access to global markets given the international status of the companies for which they work.

The outgrower scheme and land grab

It would be prudent at this point to closely consider the outgrower scheme and how it has been implemented in Nariño. The scheme brings together four key elements:

- a central facility surrounded by growers who produce on their own land under contract;
- the provision of inputs and technical assistance to growers;
- guarantees to purchase the growers' crop subject to meeting predefined standards;
- growers typically receiving a pre-agreed percentage of the final sales price of their product, thus leaving them still fully exposed to price volatility.

In Nariño, the outgrower scheme is organised around processing factories that are also linked to the traders and exporters operating in the region - such as Acepalma - , as well as with the input of supplies, the Colombian Government and government agencies such as Corponariño or the USAID-funded Cordeagropaz (Corporación para el Desarrollo Agroempresarial de Tumaco). The latter is a corporation with Government backing that has done much to fuel the agroindustry in Nariño. According to Øygard, Borchgrevink, Lazaro and Temo (2002) the success of the outgrower scheme is attributable to the following,

Increases in agricultural production and productivity... [and] ... synergies that develop between sugarcane outgrowers (individual farmers), the outgrowers' association and the processing factory (the buyer of farmers' produce) are the keys to the success of the development effort and thus the possibilities of reducing poverty.

Most of the communities that work the oil palm live in communities located along the Mira River, near the border with Ecuador, where they collectively own their land

(Law 70) and govern themselves through community councils. It is not only large scale farmers who have bought into the scheme. Incentives and loans were created following the establishment of the regional corporations Corponariño and Cordeagropaz (Corporation for the Agricultural Development of Tumaco), as well as a guaranteed sale to the larger regional companies that enticed many small scale farmers to take advantage of these initiatives. In this way, they too contributed to the expansion of the oil palm fields, and entered into a politics of strategic alliance with the larger companies through the purchase of Government sponsored credits.

Through the activities of Cordeagropaz, the small-scale producers have access to a number of support services, such as workshops, seeds, fertilizers and other inputs, advice and extension services, logistics services and quality control. The idea is to create a relationship whereby the processor acts as monopsony in relation to the inputs provided by the outgrowers, mediated by Cordeagropaz, a form of contract farming whereby the small producers who would not usually have access to the larger markets are supported by external investment and parastatal organisations. This model is meant to increase productivity and reduce farmers' exposure to risk.

A United Nations report, as well as discussing the advantages of outgrower estates, also lists the risks that arise from the nature of the business relationship formed,

First, the outgrowers face market risk posed by a reduction in demand from the buyer. Secondly, there is the risk that the processor will abuse its market position to the detriment of the outgrowers. For example, the MOA case study reveals that outgrowers sometimes experienced late payments and denial of harvesting services from the sugar estate. Thirdly, as Key and Runsten (1999) point out, with the investment of fixed resources and new cropping patterns to meet the buyer's requirements, exit from the scheme becomes constrained further reducing the producer's bargaining power¹⁸.

The same document lists the formation of an association representing outgrowers as a mitigating action to manage some of the risks, thereby providing critical enabling services such as savings and credit facilities, but as became clear whilst in Nariño following the onslaught of bud rot (shown in the photograph on the next page), these cooperatives would be the main pitfall of many of the communities visited¹⁹. The observation mission to the department of Nariño visited communities of African descent in the regions of Bajo and Alto Mira, as well as indigenous organisations of the Awá nation. We also had meetings with various Governmental entities at a regional and departmental level, as well as with the corporations that work with the oil palm industry. As much from the visits we made to communities as the numerous meetings that were had with public entities, the missions managed to reveal how the local political drive, or at least that being pushed from a central (Bogotan) force has

¹⁸ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 1st November 2006, http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/c1em32d2_en.pdf

¹⁹ Photograph taken during the mission, an example of oil palm fruit that cannot be used as it is contaminated with bud rot.

been to energetically encourage the palm oil monopoly in the region, despite the onslaught of bud rot.

There were regular complaints of high service costs that take up most of the money given to them, as well as general maintenance, technical assistance, and administrative costs, at the present moment in time these small scale cooperatives are paralysed, their labour force immobilised.



Despite Colombian Governmental schemes to buy up to seventy five percent of the debt that these small-scale farmers and cooperative incurred following the onslaught of bud rot, many are at a loss and have no other forms of income on which they can depend.

The Government, through its intimate relations with the large companies, has shown its willingness to resuscitate the production of oil palm. The solution to bud rot seems to take the form of a “hybrid seed”. *Cordeagropaz*, in agreement with other associations such as *Palma Sur*, are proposing to the communities affected by bud rot that they submit themselves to a second loan in order that they might cultivate oil palm once again; such is the case with the community in Bajo Jaguas where the cooperative is resolute.

Information released to the mission by an anonymous source at the INCODER (Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural) testifies that the disease has already been detected in plantations that have been grown using the hybrid seed. Despite this information, companies and the Government continue to push their defective alternative, which is not only expensive, but requires manual pollination and runs the risk of once again sending the small scale farmers into incomprehensible realms of debt.

The ways in which the cultivation of oil palm constitutes land grab are manifold. In order for them to continue practicing their traditional way of life, and to continue cultivating the land as they wish, the most assiduous request made by both the indigenous and Afro-Colombians’ is that they be entitled to run the lands that are theirs constitutionally (see following section for exact legislature) as they see fit.

Perhaps this can be best explained by the indigenous concept of ‘Ley de origen’, that is, Natural Law (*lex naturalis*). This is best explained through the words of the indigenous themselves,

The Natural law is the traditional science of wisdom and knowledge belonging to our indigenous ancestors, to guide us in the management of all materials and spirituality, whose fulfilment guarantees the balance and harmony of nature, order and permanence of life, of the universe and of ourselves as indigenous nations guardians of nature, regulating the relations between living beings from stones to human beings, from the point of view of the unity and conviviality of the ancestral territories bequeathed to us to the materialisation of the entire world²⁰.

Perhaps the root of the argument lies in the commonplace name of the *Elaeis Guineensis* plant itself. The ‘African’ oil palm, as it has come to be known, became a pioneer seed in Colombia. Although the seed was introduced into the Americas in conjunction with the first African slaves, it was cultivated by large companies primarily from the sixties onwards, who employed people from the region directly, many of whom share a similar ethnic descent to the oil palm itself. The idea that the same descendents continue to cultivate is almost poetic; what actually has taken place is that both the plant and the people share a common and undesired displacement. Fitting though the name of the plant may seem, it is simply misleading for the ‘African’ oil palm has proven itself to be unsuitable for the soils of Nariño and land is once again being grabbed from the black and indigenous communities who are either blindly reliant on a crop due to a lack of alternatives or helpless to do anything about it. Once again, having supposedly acquired rights for the land they have so precariously occupied, many of these communities are facing a new, more subtle, form of displacement and land grab, and central Government control, through contract farming.

Inevitably, this crisis has incited a period of forced stasis. In the pages that follow we will consider how the communities have suffered environmentally, economically, socially and politically at the hands of the outgrower model. The entire operation, viewed from this perspective, increasingly resembles a neo-colonial imperialism that grabs the land it works on as opposed to nitrifying it. What will come to light is a theory of sociologist Martin Hopenhayn: that the boom of neoliberalism, in this case through its concentration in Nariño, contributed to the collapse of ‘the main socialist powers and the triumph of the pragmatic in the political arena’²¹. Confronted with increased narcotics activity, the race for capital and a disregard for basic human rights, land is systematically grabbed from both the indigenous and black communities in a fashion that is neither equitable nor sustainable; some consider this to be an incredibly cynical move by the ruling classes to maintain power over those who were granted a certain degree of autonomy in light of the aspirations and demands of the 1991 Constitution and Law 70 of 1991.

²⁰ Luis Evelis Andrade, speech made in Bogotá, 2008, to an audience at the ONIC (Organización Nacional de los Indígenas de Colombia).

²¹ Hopenhayn, Martin, *Ni apocalípticos ni integrados* (Chile: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994).

Alienation through mimicry

Before we go on to consider the other consequences beyond the financial, this article will dwell on the continued ‘alienation’ that the individual farmers and cooperatives suffer from under a model that was superficially meant to empower.

The intended implementation of a model that mimics free trade, within a community that would not otherwise have access to the global trade infrastructure could ostensibly help it exploit a region ripe in biomass potential. Postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha claims that mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge, for as Edward Said says, ‘there is a tension between the synchronic panoptical domination (stasis) versus the counter pressure of the diachronic nature of history (difference)’²². In other words, by taking what has been learnt in the past, or from former domineering figures of the past, and applying it to the present, the ‘slippage’ that occurs with hindsight, coupled with active input, can be used to the advantage of those acting now.

Law 70, as we have seen, gave the black communities the freedom to collaborate with private firms under the guidance of administrative (semi-public) organisations. In theory, their ‘mimicry’ of a foreign model, re-enacted independently, could provide them with an idiosyncratic platform from which they could develop their own agro-industrial model, with the collaboration of the local corporations and the multinationals themselves, as is the outgrower scheme.

The reality of this model is such that those who dedicate themselves to the monoculture of ‘African’ oil palm are inextricably linked to the nepotistic system of landowners, large plot owners, subcontractors and the large scale businesses, who in turn are linked to the Colombian Government, in a vigorous strategy designed to maintain investment in the industry. There is no clean break to be had. Additionally, the fetishization of colonial culture (represented by monoculture on such a large scale) is the problem, the issue, for mimicry is a fixation on the colonial as a form of cross classificatory, discriminatory knowledge. This fetishization ‘mimes’ authority and in some ways ‘deauthorizes’ it, but it also rearticulates their (the small-growers’) own presence in terms of an Otherness, always in some ways exempt from this system.

In this way, rather than empowerment, the outgrower scheme ‘alienates’ the small-scale farmer or cooperative, in the Marxist interpretation of the word, rather than advancing their situation in any way. Bud rot has only further exacerbated their standing. Initially recast as owners of their collective territories, the central Government - through the multinationals – has managed to once again exercise power where they had momentarily lost it. We will later consider just how intentional this action has been.

²² *Of mimicry and man*, by Bhabha, Homi in *The location of culture* (London: Routledge, 2007).

Several communities have spent the last forty years sowing and cultivating palm, and there is no doubt that it still receives indiscriminate support in some communities like Vuelta de Candelilla. They indicate that in many ways the monoculture has provided them with salaried employment. Other communities with cooperations like Bocas de Guabal praise what the crop has done for their community, but admit that they know of few alternatives.

This lack of alternatives and the risks assumed upon entering into a relationship with Cordeagropaz have meant the downfall of many of the communities that were visited on the 2009 mission. The proposed model means that the small-producers assume the risks and costs of the production and sowing, selling the fruit that it produces to the large palm growers who pay them a fixed price for it. There are reports from certain communities, such as from the leaders from Bajo Pusbi, concerning the abuse of power from some of the larger businesses, and also concerning how they pay arbitrary and inconsistent prices for the fruit.

Also arbitrary has been the high costs of the service loaning, which in turn means that the majority of the credits that they have acquired go directly back to Cordeagropaz in the form of consultancy and technical assistance charges and administrative costs. It must be mentioned that other members of the effected communities complained about the working conditions, instances of people being made redundant and an excessively long working day. It is notably that they work through subcontract companies, and as such the large companies do not respond for the day labourers, to such an extent that many of these subcontracted companies disappear with the money that is meant to be paid to the workers as their wage.

2005 saw the onslaught of bud rot on the 'African' oil palm. Given the spread of this fungus there has been a marked increase in the number of people that were fired. According to the Government of Nariño, Palmas de Tumaco alone fired 500 people in the first half of 2009. The monoculture acted as an incubator for the disease to spread, causing millions of losses to small farmers, who are unable to pay the debt they owe due to lack of fruit they can sell. Seeing as the farmers are the ones who assume the risk the burden of the debt remains with them, this despite efforts made by the Government to pardon up to 75% of the debt, or even buy it back in some cases.

Doubts remain as to the real knowledge possessed by Cordeagropaz as to the extent of bud rot. As has been explained, rather than attempt to investigate genuine alternatives to the monoculture of oil palm, outfits such as Fedepalma and foreign embassies continue to promote and generate new schemes to sow quantities of foreign and 'hybrid' seeds²³. If a cooperative or small-producer agrees, they are entitled to a second loan, thereby further indebting themselves to the State. Palma Sur, for example, is already offering new credits to continue sowing palm.

²³ In a visit made to the Dutch Embassy in Bogotá, there were plans to proceed with a new 'hybrid' palm in the northern regions of Colombia, adjacent to areas also contaminated with bud rot.

We received the disconcerting message on a number of occasions during the mission - including from an anonymous source at INCODER and other departmental authorities - that palm grown using the new 'hybrid' seed has already been affected by bud rot in plantations where it is being developed. Regardless of this information companies backed by Cordeagropaz continue to sell the seeds to local associations. The 'hybrid' seed is more expensive than its predecessor as it requires manual pollination. In several cases the cooperatives were forced to increase the expansion of the lands on which they worked, directly benefitting the businesses as opposed to the small-producers.

Many end up accepting this initiative out of worry for a lack of alternatives, given that they do not receive support for the crops that are no longer profitable.

Landscape, nature and the body politic²⁴

The uniformity of the oil palm uninterruptedly lining the banks of the river in the Alto y Bajo Mira region of Nariño is striking. Traditionally of course palms planted for decorative purposes are arranged in an aesthetically engaging fashion, to impress whoever the audience might be through their evocation of the ‘tropical’; such meticulous rigidity might not necessarily be expected in an agroindustrial context. However, as learnt on the mission, there is nothing spontaneous about the cultivation of the ‘African’ oil palm in Nariño either: they are part of a profitable industry that advises cultivators large or small as to how closely they can be grown together.

Once again the irony of the name ‘African’ oil palm and the resultant evocation of its ‘tropicality’ undermine the reality of the situation, whilst conceivably explaining the stringency in the way it is farmed. ‘Tropicality’ according to critic Nancy Leys Stepan is a constructed and discursive representation of the tropics in modern geography²⁵. Although the scientific name of the plant explains the commonplace translation, the implicit exoticism reminds us of the migration of the oil palm during the time of the Conquest. By planting in such a fashion, and retaining the ‘African’ epithet when referencing it, we cannot help but be reminded of the ways in which land was



modelled by the colonising forces of the past, or even hark back to the Age of Reason, to 18th Century Enlightenment, when topographic chaos was controlled through the imposition of order.

Logically, the fruit is more profitable if more of it can be grown within the same area, but given the current degradation of the environment it has been suggested that the reduction of space between each palm has actively contributed to the dissemination of bud rot (as shown in this photograph)²⁶. We were told on a number of occasions that because of the compact nature of each plantation, when an area does become infected it is exceptionally hard to replenish the soil and begin again, which also

²⁴ Title taken from Kenneth Robert Olwig’s text *Landscape, nature and the body politic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

²⁵ Stepan, Nancy Leys, *Picturing Tropical Nature* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001)

²⁶ Photograph credit to Dr. Juli Hazlewood

explains the cemetery of dead oil palm we witnessed on a number of occasions.

This article does not wish to insinuate that the Government knowing planted oil palm in such a way as to ruin such vast quantities of land, but given the history of agriculture in Colombia (such as the vicious approach taken to rubber tapping and its subsequent failure) and the people that are affected, we are reminded of past misdemeanours. Reading critic Kenneth Robert Olwig helps explain how the imposition of order is closely linked to nationalism,

The identification of landscape with the ennobled blood of a unified body politic, it will be seen, helps explain the origins of key aspects of modern blood-and-soil nationalism²⁷.

The quotation explains how the race of a nation is expressed in its soil and landscape, and how the progress of a nation is as an outcome of the evolution of landscape. The ‘unified body politic’, we can imagine in the case of Colombia and from the perspective of Government, would be a landscape modelled and defined by its profitable turnover. Through the guise of working to improve the livelihood and economic situation of the black and indigenous communities, the central Government can potentially push its nationalistic, neoliberal interests through a subtle, indirect and largely unaccountable approach. The fear of the more radical consequences of Law 70 and the 1991 Constitution coming to pass is assuaged when a community can be monitored and controlled through careful application and manipulation of the legislature that permits Government’s (consensual) involvement.

We can legitimately talk of a high correlation between the intensification of the cultivation of oil palm, the way this has been realised and the degradation of the environment. Fundamentally, what we must remember, and what has been reported on a number of occasions, transcending the inevitable ecological imbalance and loss of biological diversity in the region caused by a monoculture at such a large scale, is the following: the Pacific region is not apt for the monoculture of oil palm given the humidity levels that the area experiences and the optimum temperature for its growth. In their final report, environmentalists who took part in the 2009 research mission *Agrocombustibles, ¿beneficio para quién?* (Biofuels, who benefits?) attributed the origins of the disease to the time when oil palm was first introduced to Nariño. They consider the disaster to be a result of a foreign seed being cultivated in an alien environment.

What this environment does is create an incubation zone ripe for the spread of disease, such as monilia in the case of cocoa and bud rot in the case of oil palm. We will now consider several of the impacts that agroindustry has had on the 35 000 hectares of oil palm currently planted in Nariño.

²⁷ Olwig, Kenneth Robert, *Landscape, nature and the body politic*.

Deforestation

Deforestation takes place not only to make room for palm trees, but also to construct access roads and so that the fruit can be transported out of the plantations. In most of the literature it produces, Fedepalma claims that agrofuel production does not result in deforestation, and actively talks of the improvement it makes to the local environment. This cannot be supported based on many of the oral testimonies we received, as well as taking into account the fact that to date, nearly 20% of the Amazon, home to an estimated 30% of the world's species of plants and animals, has been burned or otherwise destroyed, much of it due to large-scale agriculture²⁸.

Microclimates

There have been small changes in the micro climate, including in the rain given the water cycle of the palms, in the winds due to deforestation and in the increased temperatures felt in the neighbouring areas to the palm cultivations.

Pollution

Another ecological factor worth considering is the pollution of the local rivers. They are contaminated with chemicals used by farmers, fumigations and the residual waste that is poured into them from production. At least two of the communities that we visited complained of a notable decrease in the number of fish in the rivers and tributaries near the palm plantations. Corponariño confirmed that on a number of occasions they levelled sanctions against companies who poorly managed their waste and the water that surrounded their plantations. Even more worrying is that Corponariño stated that these fines have a very limited effect, seeing as the companies will often prefer to pay the fine than take action to reduce the damages inflicted on the surrounding environment. Additionally, the contamination and bad water management has meant that an important proliferation of vector insects and diseases like dengue, amongst others.

Loss of food sovereignty

As well as the erosion, depletion and removal of nutrients that a monoculture such as palm oil can cause to the soil, it also prohibits the growth of traditional crops. In addition to issues of space, the oil palm reduces the amount of water traditional crops can take in due to the size and extension of their roots and the extensive foliage. This puts the food sovereignty of many local communities at risk, as well as the diverse flowers and fauna that was reported in the area. According to Corponariño, this environmental disfiguration accounts for the loss of around 30% of vegetation cover in the Alto Mira area, in the Tumaco municipality. Spokesmen and cultivators from every community reveal – with a certain degree of remorse – that they have sacrificed their food sovereignty and their traditional activities such as hunting, fishing and subsistence farming; an ecological unbalance has been struck.

²⁸ D. O. Hall and R. P. Overend, *Biomass, Renewable Energy* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1987), p.136

Fumigation

The Awá community spoke to us at length about the impact that fumigations have on their reserves. The mission observed that there is a clear violation of the rights of these communities. Plan Colombia supports the development of palm oil and mass fumigation. Amongst the complaints were incidents of skin disease and permanent markings, chronic diarrhoea, respiratory illnesses and forced abortions, and in a few cases death. Despite directly reporting to the departmental impunity has prevailed. As well as this the traditional crops that have been fumigated have also been polluted.

Fumigation has also generated a considerable level of displacement in the region, which is not recognised as such by the State. Palm oil is often seen and referred to as an alternative for coca plantations as it is a profitable product that can be safely commercialised. However, it must be noted that despite the continued expansion of the palm and the continual fumigations in the area, coca cultivation has not diminished. It should be noted that the coca plant itself is the least affected by the fumigations. According to certain institutions it has already increased, which represents a fracas in the politics of fumigation. There is never any prior consultation. It was even insinuated by the Awá people that there has to be a relation between the intensification of the fumigations and the arrival of the PC, which causes many to displace themselves from their own territories.

It should be reiterated that this article does not insinuate that central Government purposefully condemned much of the south-western oil palm to decay through the close quarters in which it is grown in a macabre effort to maintain its authority over the black and indigenous nations of Nariño. Nevertheless, in imposing such a model of growth through investment from multinational companies, it cannot help but remind us of past agricultural failures (rubber tapping) and of the neoliberal model being propagated at a national level, in this case to the detriment of the locality, both financially and environmentally. It also represents an omnipresent, undetectable control over those who constitutionally are encouraged to exercise greater degrees of authority and sovereignty.

Neoliberal maintenance

Following another massacre inflicted upon members of their nation, the UNIPA sent out the following communiqué on the 2nd of April, 2009,

. . . following this [the massacre] it is worth highlighting the humanitarian crisis that the Awá nation is currently experiencing, that was not the same when we were children - conflicts with legal and illegal armed groups, mass displacements, cultivation of illicit drugs, indiscriminate fumigations, eradications, food shortages and health problems, international businesses that are making an negative impact in the zone.

It has been established thus far that the advice from regional politicians and local government in both Tumaco and Pasto is consistently ignored by central authorities. Organisations such as Corponariño and Cordeagropaz directly implement national level political demands at a local level instead, bypassing those who are supposedly meant to do so. As a result, the black communities and indigenous nations resident in the area must suffer a national politic that stands uncomfortably with any detached engagement suggested in Colombian legislature.

We have already illustrated how the Colombian oil palm industry is exemplary in its demonstration of the intricate links that exist between North and South under neoliberal globalization. The recent need to curb greenhouse gas emissions has lead many nations to propose solution that require an increased use of agrofuels. This shift does nothing to prevent nor account for the human rights abuses, environmental devastation, poverty and inequality that occur during its production²⁹.



Why Colombia supports neoliberal globalization in such a way has already been considered, and problematised, but equally as disturbing is how Uribe's administration supported this model. Rather than eschew foreign intervention like other Latin American nations, it was galvanised, replicated and maintained under his Presidency, unchanged during Santos' term too. A Marxist interpretation would infer that the (postcolonial) frontier expansion of the West is based in its continued effort to afford democracy, individualism and higher culture;

²⁹ Photograph demonstrating the quantity of unusable fruit found on the roadside in Nariño, discarded.

in addition to this, the Colombian status quo has proven that it will go to incredible lengths to encourage investment from outside influences and to upkeep a neoliberal agenda, with all its ramifications.

During the nineteenth century, to paraphrase Alistair Hennessey, the geographical North's attraction to the South was largely attributable to political opportunity, natural history, commodity, technologically aided discovery and the curiosities of the Victorian Age³⁰. The 'New World' was a site of fascination, and had been since the sixteenth century. Edmund Burke's essays of the eighteenth century compounded the belief that nature was 'sublime', that is, the sense of awe felt by the viewer in the presence of the vast and mysterious 'tropical' South. Yet it was also explained, by explorers such as Alexander von Humboldt, that nature was to be dominated as the 'sublime' was synonymous with a grotesque excess, to be tamed and regimented in order to produce profitable output, as was explored in the last chapter. As Hennessey describes, the land speculator, or controller, rather than the 'rugged pioneer' became the more significant figure when new frontiers were being explored.

As we read in fictional texts such as Eustacio Rivera's *La vorágine*, written in the early twentieth century when the rubber trade was reaching its summit, there has often been a stern *caudillismo* that maintains order in the countryside, feared by the men of the city. The Spanish colonial caste system perpetuated such a model, as it provided the strong man rule necessary to control a potentially rebellious *mestizo* population. Thus were perpetuated the hierarchical, corporatist and patrimonial assumptions of 'late medievalism, together with the cultural norms of Mediterranean peasant society and the religious beliefs of the Spanish Catholic Church' [Hennessey].

The evidence that we have gathered thus far leads us to argue that the reinstatement of centrally controlled industry, or at least centrally monitored, represents a novel and more subtle control of two populations that indirectly threaten the 'progress' of Colombia's economy. This can be further exemplified by the paramilitary and intimidatory activities that we are yet to consider: Colombia's modern take on the *caudillismo* of the past, and the answer to the previously asked 'how' question with regards to the maintenance of control. Firms have become tangled up in allegations of direct collaboration with paramilitary organisations: the Awá indigenous nation has reported instances of intimidation in the Peña Alegría community, for example, by the Astorga firm who have surrounded and confined members of the Awá nation. The Peña Alegría community has been reduced to an area of 30 hectares at the hands of the palm growers, causing them grave problems with food provision. Forced displacement has led many to look for work in Ecuador, land entitlement documents have been 'lost' that were 'lent' to companies, such is the case in Bocas de Guabal, and many sources report a common business strategy that involves purchasing a

³⁰ Hennessey, Alistair, *The Frontier in Latin American History* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).

small area of land that happens to border a much larger plot, the latter of which is invaded as soon as the documents have been signed.

The Defensoría (Department of the Public Advocate) told the mission that the disbandment of the paramilitary forces in Nariño had merely been a ‘well acted spectacle’. With the implementation of Plan Colombia, multiple sources in the region reported to us an increased presence of both the paramilitary and Colombian army in the rural regions, who of course came into conflict with the leftist guerrillas already operating in the region. The violence continues to this day, through the presence of groups such as the Rastrojos, former members of the AUC (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia).

Fedepalma refutes any acts of violence in their literature, affirming on the contrary that, ‘. . . [violence] has as scenarios areas where there are no palm trees. Or, violence is found in other areas and nothing to do with palm activities³¹. Nevertheless, this same federation counts Palmeiras as one of its members. This company refuses to give back 800 hectares of land to the Bajo Pusbi community despite the passing of Law 70 in 1993, whereby it was ratified that the land on which they were growing their plantations was a collective territory, only to be used by the Afro-Colombian community. On the 2nd of March 2006 INCODER passed Resolution 0525 and in July of 2009 the land still did not belong to its legal owners. During the court proceedings, Palmeiras claim that they should receive compensation for improvements made to the land on their behalf, whilst community leaders have claimed that armed groups operate within these areas, prohibiting any attempts to recuperate the land. Similar charges have been brought against Salamanca, who at one point illegally occupied 2000 hectares in the same region, returning the land (still populated by palms contaminated with bud rot) without clearing the oil palm or returning the land to its original condition.

Perhaps one of the most troubling instances that was recounted to the mission was that of the assassination of Francisco Hurtado Cabezas, who filed a lawsuit against Palmeiras in 1997 in the small community of Pital Pirague.

The mission came to the conclusion that the most worrying impact that palm expansion has on the department, as well as the loss of territorial autonomy, is the loss of community. As well as losing control of their own lands, we also noticed that traditional practices of production were lost, as traditional cultivations were replaced by monoculture of palms. There was also a loss in general security and food sovereignty. Familial relations deteriorated, as well as those formed across communities (given the long working days that palm and plantations require). Then there are the less measureable factors like the conflicts that emerged within communities, human rights abuses (forced displacements, threats, intimidation, assassinations) and reports of increased violence following the arrival of the monoculture.

³¹ Fedepalma, *African Palm: myths and realities of the conflict* (Bogotá: Fedepalma, 2007).

The consequences

In an interview carried out by Garry Leech on behalf of NACLA (North American Congress for Latin America), Hernán Cortés of the PCN was asked what it would take to address the problems faced by Afro-Colombians; he suggested the following,

We need to escape the economic model that the capitalist globalization has imposed on us [...] There needs to be a political change in the country. Not only a change of government, but a change in the politics of the country and in the economics of the country too³².

He went on to explain what has now been thoroughly established by this article, that the Colombian Government and the palm companies are undermining the sovereignty and autonomy of both the black and indigenous communities. He goes one step further to assert that the corporate relationship formed between the cooperatives and businesses were created with the sole intention of undermining and monitoring Afro-Colombians. As well as the reported paramilitary activities in the region, the formation of the small grower cooperatives in Nariño ‘represents an alternative approach intended to achieve the same objective’.

According to Cortés, what is being done reinforces a colonial, oppressive control over those who – constitutionally – have achieved a potentially threatening degree of autonomy. The change also emerges when we notice varying trends in land tenure. The initiative to expand oil palm plantations has generated a notable change in the use of the land, with a subsequent concentration in land tenure. Historically, the department of Nariño has been characterised by a division of land into small concentrations of ownership, but with the expansion of the monoculture of palm oil, the mission noted that where the most palm oil was produced in the municipality of Tumaco, the landowners are now those with the concentrated land tenure, an initiative that is being encouraged by local Nariño initiatives.

The formation of cooperatives means that worker unions are no longer formed; cooperatives do not have the same function as unions making the large firms increasingly less accountable. Superficially the outgrower model gives the impression of encouraging equality and independence, however, we recall Frantz Fanon’s theories on the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised when we analyse the relationship that is created between the firm and the individual growers. Fanon asserted that the black community was exempt from much of Western thought, especially the Hegelian Master-Bondsman dialectic, as the suppressed black worker is not able to fulfil the role of ‘being for Other’ as there is no reciprocity between the two parties. Conscience only exists when it is recognised, and as Sartre explains the black dialectic cannot be defined as ‘Self and Other [...] but the

³² Full article to be found at www.nacla.org

otherness of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity', which is echoed in *Peau noire, masques blancs*,

N'étant jamais sur que le Blanc le considère comme conscience en-soi pour-soi, sans cesse il va se préoccuper de déceler la résistance, l'opposition, la contestation.

Though we should not reduce Fanon's writing to the purely psychoanalytical, his thought can be applied to the situation faced by the black (and on some levels indigenous) communities in Nariño. Unsure that their relationship with the firm will ever be one of reciprocity, the recognition of their own 'Self' is rendered unstable, negligible, and as Fanon puts it, their ability to resist, oppose and contest is neutered. This imperfect relationship, not based on equality will forever remain precarious, especially when it is anchored in deep seated historical. Fanon was insistent upon the fact that Europe is the creation of the third world, as all that they value has been stolen and produced in the geographical South. The 'whimsical' nature of capital is what they use to justify their actions, as well as its fluidity,

Le colon fait l'histoire. Sa vie est une épopée, une odyssee³³.

Involving the black communities in a relationship of this dynamic means that, although on paper they work for themselves, they have once again entered into a debilitating working relationship where not only do they work for a foreign company, they sacrifice their land, autonomy and capital to those from whom they had fought to obtain distance. Given the lack of social revolutions in Colombia's past, once again they become the victims to foreign outfits and interests, as well as an oppressive central Colombian Government determined to maintain their authority legally or otherwise. Carlos Rosero, in a speech made in October 2001, expresses these sentiments eloquently,

From Vietnam to Africa, the past and present examples are multiple, where war and racism combine to make of certain minorities, understood as groups with distinctive traces and non dominant positions, victims of horror. The secret threads of the storylines of the war in Colombia, one of the many where Afro-Descendent peoples have taken part with flags raised as if it were their own, render them assassins or assassinated, displaced or the displacers, but whichever one they are also victims, which open the possibility for new wounds and for a constant and eternal return of hate³⁴.

³³ Fanon, Frantz, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris : La Découverte, 1961).

³⁴ *Los afrodescendientes y el conflicto armado en Colombia: La insistencia en lo propio como alternativa; Presentación al Simposio Internacional Pasado, presente y futuro de los Afrodescendientes. Cartagena, October 2001.*

Conclusion

It is with caution that we call the *Elaeis Guineensis* by its commonplace name – the ‘African’ oil palm – given its historical connotations; although this ‘pioneer’ seed is cultivated by large companies who employ people from the region, many of whom share a similar ethnic descent to the palm itself, to imply that there is an inherent connection between its cultivation and their will to do so would be erroneous.

It is not within the remit of this article to suggest concrete alternatives to agrofuel production in Nariño, but whilst on the mission we observed several. One farmer was part of a fair-trade scheme through which he is able to grow and cultivate traditional crops for sale. The commercialisation of traditional practices was just one of the other possibilities presented by the region. The Government in Pasto had invested money in crop diversification schemes to fund a project that will produce other agricultural produce over a sustained period of time.

Given the current impasse, now would be the opportune time to investigate sustainable alternatives and deviate from what has proven to be an unsuccessful mode of production in Colombia’s troubling political ecology.

However, given Colombia’s inherent conservatism, the perpetuation of neoliberal economics, the triumph of pragmatism over the socialist dream, the appearance of a miraculous ‘hybrid’, the ability to monitor minority groups and the often intangible articles of both the 1991 Constitution and Law 70 given modern interests and Government, it would require a revolutionary fulcrum shift for a Government with such a profiteering, myopic agenda to clear southern-western Colombia of the oil palm its so vehemently champions.

The Supreme Court of Colombia has recently passed an ‘Auto 004’ which obliges the Colombian State protect 34 of the most endangered indigenous nations in Colombia, amongst which figure the Awá people. Perhaps through creating such spaces, as well as through continued international pressure, this time not from the multinational corporations, solutions and restraints can be put in place. Ideally, by allowing both the black community and the autochthonous to exercise the degree of autonomy and sovereignty that legislature might permit them, alternatives might arise; needless to say the reality of this depends on the direction taken under Santos’ Presidency.

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