

Cultivating “Care”: Colonial Botany and the Moral Lives of Oil Palm at the Twentieth Century's Turn

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Abstract

This paper draws on archival research to trace the techniques used by scientists and government officials involved with palm oil at the turn of the twentieth century. For them, mundane practices of “carefulness” were paramount as they worked on collecting, identifying, marketing, and improving the oil palm. But they also applied this so-called care to people: care of the oil palm was thought to presuppose care of the “native,” providing a correction for what were seen as “careless” local manners of cultivation. Colonial techniques of care thus sought to encompass both plants and peoples within contemporary liberal rhetoric's of efficiency and moral improvement. This embodies how scientific and political care can interlink through their undersides of control, exploitation, and domination, which remain obscured by narratives of care themselves. Examining these links between commodity histories and scientific techniques is therefore essential for understanding environmental and social concerns regarding oil palm plantations today. An awareness of the afterlives of colonial discourses might encourage a more critical “care” in response to these issues today, challenging taken-for-granted notions of the benefits of corporate care.

Keywords: *Oil Palm, Colonialism, Kew, Botany, Care, Techniques, West Africa, Southeast Asia, Commodity, History*

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Background to the Study

In 1889, the first documented attempt to cultivate a plantation of African Oil Palms in Malaysia failed (Oil Palm 1889). Yet by 1907, Henry Nicholas Ridley, the British Director of Singapore's Botanic Gardens, felt justified in stating that the African Oil Palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) should be cultivated “for profit” in Southeast Asia since it gave a “good return in Africa at little expense” (1907: 37). His statement drew on decades of back-and-forth correspondence among trading companies, colonial officials, and botanic gardens who had long been considering a cross-continental move for this plant from its homes in West and Central Africa. Today, this move has come to shape not only the landscapes of Malaysia and Indonesia (as just two examples), but also the ways people around the world consume packaged snacks, cook, wash their hair, feed their livestock, and fuel their cars.¹ This has had enormous societal, environmental, and economic impacts, creating what is now termed the “oil palm complex” (Cramb and McCarthy 2018). This denies simplistic notions of center and periphery: Indonesia and Malaysia currently provide the majority of the world's supply to centers of consumption in China and India (Byerlee, Falcon, and Naylor, 2017).

But the oil palm is not a new food crop. Across West Africa, people have been developing food and other uses of oil palms for millennia. There is evidence for its early use in Ghana during the late Holocene (Logan and D'Andrea 2012). It is also prominent in culinary and material cultures elsewhere in the region, from Senegal to Angola, where it has been consumed and traded for centuries. Throughout west and Central Africa and as far east as Tanzania, its oils are used in cooking, soap, and as a light fuel. It is favored as a condiment for fufu (Watkins 2011; Martin 1988), can be used to make palm wine, and as a medicine. For example, it is a Yoruba treatment for smallpox (Robins : 21).

Often, European scientific knowledge grew out of encounters with local knowledges, which became subject to colonial practices of “translation” (Bewell 2017; Raj 2007: 18). Yet the mechanisms and techniques by which oil palm was translated (and transplanted) remain underexplored. This article focuses on how local knowledges and uses of oil palms were turned into “immutable mobiles” that became central to European attempts at “domination at a distance” (Latour 1987: 221–25). In so doing, it tells of the broader moral values that shaped palm oil expansion at the turn of the twentieth century, in which interlinked notions of careful scientific work and the moral improvement of colonial subjects through cultivation came to the fore.² Care, cultivation, and colony—the etymologies of each of these English terms are linked through their origins in the Latin term *colere*: “to till, tend, care for” (Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003: 9). In the later nineteenth century these ideals regarding cultivation and colonialism were grafted onto “much older discourses of imperial providence and 'improvement'” (Ross 2017: 9; Drayton 2000).

Objective of the Study

The Study focus on how moral ideals of care intersected with practical techniques of scientific, botanical, and bureaucratic carefulness grows from tracing a historical biography of the oil palm through official documents, letters, reports, and notes contained within the economic botany archive collection at London's Kew Gardens (RBGK ECB/8/1 634.622, “Oil Palm:

Manuscripts and Reprints Bound Together 1876–1913”).³ Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information and other publications. Sources therein include not only memos, reports, and requests written by Kew officials, but also materials sent to them by government officials, trading companies, research institutes, and naturalists around the world. These offer a broad picture of the issues, assumptions, and priorities of Europeans who were encountering oil palms and their produce at that time. Being largely authored for practical purposes, these sources demonstrate not only a timeline of events but also the machinations and techniques through which caring attitudes were made effective.

The circulation of knowledge about plants between botanical gardens around the world was a form of empire-making, in which institutions like Kew facilitated the “despotic paternalism” of the British Empire (Drayton 2000: 227). Being central to the industrial revolution, palm oil had a particular significance for Britain, which would wind up controlling “the heart of the oil palm belt” after the “scramble for Africa” (Robins 2021: 3). Due to my focus on English-language sources at Kew, this paper will highlight British priorities, yet other European colonizing nations, too, helped develop the scientific processes that became central to *Elaeis guineensis*'s proliferation.⁴ Also central were the diverse Indigenous knowledges of this plant that only make themselves known in the archives through their omissions, or in ventriloquized form, in British-authored sources. Though this paper explores *Elaeis* through the lens of the British colonial experience, I contextualize this through attention to what is masked in the British record, which often comes to light through European frustrations as they attempted to co-opt and streamline the knowledge about *Elaeis* that they believed they were “discovering” (Stoler 2010: 1–4).⁵

Methodology of the Study

The study adopt interdisciplinary approach which, bringing together discourses on care in STS and narratives from environmental history and the history of science. This interdisciplinarity is essential since botanists and colonial officials used “care” in two forms. First, care was expressed as carefulness. Botanists expressed the need for extreme carefulness in the collection and transport of their specimens. They learned and taught skills of careful identification, observation, breeding, and experimentation. This points to how care is an affectively charged mode of attention or concern. It is more than a mere stance; it is practical and has material consequences as a “concrete work of maintenance” (Puig De La Bellacasa 2017: 4). Care not only structures how scientists come to know but is integral to science's inspiration (Daston 1995: 3). Yet care is a deeply ambivalent “selective mode of attention: it circumscribes and cherishes some things, lives, or phenomena as its objects. In the process, it excludes others.

Practices of care are always shot through with asymmetrical power relations” (Martin, Myers, and Viseu : 627). Scientific care, through techniques of carefulness, has long been used to organize, discipline, and classify human and non-human bodies. Botanic gardens are primary sites in which to examine this process because they are places where an “attitude” of ownership toward plants and people came into being (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 58).

In this way, careful scientific practice was linked to a second form of care: the broader narratives of care associated with ideologies of improvement and use. As such, care offers an analytic framework that allows for the rhetoric of use and improvement identified by Drayton (2000) to be understood in relation to the micro-practices of scientists and officials, reflecting how ethics of care were both enacted through scientific practice and grounded in everyday bureaucratic communications with and about botanic gardens. As carefulness became the valued scientific skill of the time, colonial subjects were branded as uncared for and in need of moral improvement. While the new science of botany became an opportunity for the creation of power and social capital, epistemological (and physical) violence was being done in the colonies, as European colonizers sought to force the colonized to “improve” themselves by imitating colonial practices of care.

Today, consumers in the global North are often encouraged to care about palm oil. A visitor might marvel at Kew's careful curation of exotic plants as exemplifying the “wonders of a fast-vanishing world,” while at the same time they are encouraged to care about the “environmental impact of massive oil palm plantations” (Teltscher 2020: 308). Consumers may come to care about plantations' effects on orangutans, biodiverse rainforest environments, and (less often) the displacement of Indigenous peoples and smallholders in Southeast Asia.⁶ But as people and corporations express and enact care about these issues, such narratives may again obfuscate the histories of environmental, scientific, and social care that coalesce around palm oil. Following how those associated with palm oil expressed and enacted techniques of care and carefulness in the decades when the industry began expanding globally reveals that its development in ways that have harmed so many was not inevitable. This casts light on care's less benevolent history and offers insights into how one might foster more critical forms of environmental, scientific, and social care in the present day.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The Study concludes that as developments took place, botanists continued to develop their knowledge of plants, including *Elaeis*, through detailed observation, and to share these observations with Kew. The Kew archives contain the proceedings of an 1879 Meeting of the Committee of the Agri-Horticultural society of Madras, which record the Basel Mission in India's success with introducing oil palm seeds from the Gold Coast:

The Study recommended that typical observers such as this were “learning to be affected,” to notice and to care about the micro-details of their plants (Latour 2004: 205), this in itself being seen as a worthwhile pursuit. Botanists had long sought to foster the skill of careful observation as the marker of their craft, mirroring developments in other scientific disciplines (Daston 2008). Yet the boom in trade meant that traders now felt a need for knowledge of how to gain as much oil from the palms as efficiently as possible. They sought Kew's help, and so the observations and measurements of *Elaeis* that Kew and its networks held were put in service to answer a question that would puzzle officials for decades.

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