

Notes on the Oil Palm in Lusophone West Africa

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The African oil palm is native to the West African coast, extending from 16° N latitude in Senegal to 16° S latitude in Angola. Its distribution also spreads eastward within the Congo River Basin (Zeven, 1967). The earliest European record of palm oil is from Portuguese explorers, dating to the latter half of the 15th and early 16th centuries (Corley and Tinker, 2003). Palm oil has a long history of utilization by indigenous people, as an illuminant and cooking oil which is a rich dietary source of provitamin A (carotene).

In the early 19th Century, as the slave trade of West Africa was being shut down, maritime transportation was improving and there was an increasing market in Europe for palm oil for soap making and as a lubricant, palm oil became an important commodity and to some extent it replaced the slave trade. The British, French, German, Dutch, Belgian, Spanish and Portuguese were active in colonization or trading in the region and were involved to varying degrees with the export of palm oil. Early in the 19th Century, most palm oil production came from wild or semi-wild palm stands, but as the value of the commodity increased over the decades, there were efforts to promote more formal cultivation of the palm in plantations (Lynn, 1997).

Portuguese colonies in Western Africa were located near the northern (Guinea Bissau) and at the southern limits (Angola) of oil palm distribution. As a colony, Portuguese Guinea, as it was then known, wedged between the French colonies of Senegal and Guinea and was of minimal economic concern to Portugal. Apparently, oil palm was never promoted to any degree as a plantation crop, although the spontaneous tree populations continued to be harvested for palm oil, palm kernels and various other uses (Johnson, 1984). FAOSTAT data indicate that palm oil production in Guinea-Bissau amounted to 6,350 mt in 2007, while palm kernel production that

year totaled 8,000 mt. Both commodities ranked near the bottom of the 20 leading agricultural commodities of the country.

By contrast, Angola was looked upon by the Portuguese as their most important African colony, because of its rich agricultural resources, producing a surplus of basic agricultural commodities such as cassava, maize, potatoes and beans. Indigenous oil palm populations were exploited, with some minimal management, for oil and kernels and, as in Guinea-Bissau, production has continued on that basis to the present. In 2007, palm oil production in Angola stood at 55,000 mt and palm kernels at 23,000 mt, according to FAOSTAT; the two commodities, respectively, rank 13th and 20th in overall agricultural production. In January 2009, the Angolan government announced that it planned to restore and enhance palm oil production by encouraging oil palm cultivation through support to family agricultural firms. A prime motivation behind this effort is the fact that Angola annually imports about 3,000 mt of palm oil (Angola, 2009).

One objective of this note is to call attention to two early and little-known technical references on colonial-era efforts to promote palm oil development in Angola.

The earliest publication is by Figueiredo (1871). Although not evident from its title, this booklet deals with the oil palm of Angola. The author, a missionary pastor, lived in Angola for nearly five years and travelled widely. He considered oil palm, the most valuable tree of the province and describes it as an important source of oil, sap and leaves for thatch and to weave hats and baskets and moreover, he endorsed legislation to prevent tree felling and suggested government programs to replant areas where palms formerly grew as well as formal plantation cropping to generate more income per unit area. Other measures he advocated

were to establish oil palm nurseries to supply seedlings, create legal recognition of tree tenure in relation to land ownership and utilization of palm sap not only for wine, but also to make sugar, distilled spirits and vinegar. At the time the booklet appeared, slavery was still legal (it was abolished in 1875) and Figueiredo believed that promoting oil palm could be of general benefit to the colony at the same time as it provided income and employment opportunities for slaves when they became emancipated. The author's advocacy of complete utilization of the oil palm's varied products, within the broader context of agricultural development, anticipates modern development approaches embodied in agroforestry and sustainable agriculture.

José Joaquim de Almeida, a Portuguese agronomist in Angola, presented a thesis to the Institute of Agronomy in Lisbon on the African oil palm in Angola (Almeida, 1906). The author describes the natural distribution of the oil palm in West Africa and the economic history of palm oil and kernel and trade as related to Portugal. An interesting point made is that the initial exports of Angolan palm oil went to Brazil and that the slave trade between the two countries also brought about introduction of the African oil palm to the New World. The study presents a comprehensive botanical description of the oil palm, including fruit characteristics of the named varieties of that day. Considerable attention is given to the agronomic aspects of the oil palm cultivation and processing of fruits and nuts. The study documents in detail the many products native peoples derive from the oil palm and states his enlightened view that the Portuguese should respect the indigenous tradition of drinking palm wine and not attempt to prohibit the practice, as advocated by some colonial officials. Overall, Almeida's study represents a well-documented and valuable historical document.

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