

# Report of Scoping Survey of the Lever Brothers' Plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo, 1900-1930

## Executive Summary

In 2020, the death of George Floyd and the global Black Lives Matter demonstrations led to an increased public awareness of Britain's colonial past and participation in the transatlantic slave trade. In response to questions relating to Lever Brothers' activities in the Belgian Congo, Unilever commissioned a four-month scoping survey to better understand the history of Lever Brothers' overseas plantations in the Congo and the Solomon Islands. A review of existing literature on the history of Lever Brothers and their overseas plantations was undertaken alongside an examination of the archival material held in Unilever's Arts, Archives and Record Management (UARM) located in Port Sunlight.<sup>1</sup> This review established four key areas of interest

- The exploitation of people and resources in and around the plantations, including the use of exploitive contracts and practices of coercion by company agents to recruit workers.
- Instances of abuse and mistreatment of workers and members of local communities by company agents.
- Patterns of corruption amongst company agents, which enabled coercive recruitment practices, corporal punishment and other practices that contravened company policy.
- The conflict between native land rights and the rights of Lever Brothers to land which had been acquired from local communities in the Solomon Islands and the Congo

Although there is a strong body of research on the history of William Lever, Lever Brothers and their overseas plantations, there remain several important questions about the activities of Lever Brothers in the Solomon Islands and the Congo. The examination of existing scholarship and the company archives in UARM has highlighted the necessity for further research in a number of key areas. These include,

- The integration of a broader range of perspectives on the history of Lever Brothers, including those of plantation workers and local communities.
- The relationship between the development of the Lever Brothers' plantations and the wider historical context of European colonialism and the extensive political and social networks which William Lever developed.
- The responsibility of individuals, including William Lever, within Lever Brothers, and the subsidiary companies of Huileries du Congo Belge and Lever's Pacific Plantations Limited, in directing company policy and practices on the plantations.
- The legacy of Lever Brothers' overseas plantations on local communities and ecologies, including the social and economic impact of the plantations.

The areas identified for future research present several challenges and opportunities in the construction of a more transparent and inclusive history of Lever Brothers and the dissemination of these narratives to wider audiences. The report highlights the need to look beyond the company archive held by UARM and examine a wide range of primary sources ranging from the official papers of the British and Belgian colonial governments to the records of the Anti-Slavery Society, the documents of missionary groups and the private papers of individuals linked to the Lever Brothers plantations. The report also identifies a number of areas in which collaborations with heritage institutions will significantly enrich future research on the subject. It also emphasises the need to further integrate the voices of Solomon Island and Congolese workers into the history of the Lever Brothers' plantations, through engagement with

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unilever.com/our-company/our-history-and-archives/> [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> December 2021]

descendent communities in the UK, Western Pacific and Democratic Republic of Congo. Engaging from a variety of disciplinary perspectives with a wide range of stakeholders, including community groups, grass-roots history organisations and communities outside of the UK, is vital for the development of an inclusive history of Lever Brothers' plantations.

Dr Josephine Tierney  
University of Liverpool

