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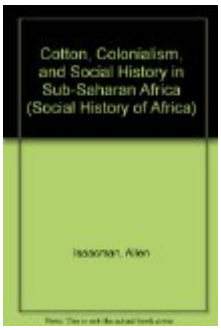

Allen Issacman, Richard Roberts, eds.. *Cotton, Colonialism and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1995. xi + 314 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-435-08966-5.

Reviewed by Nancy Jacobs

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This volume contains thirteen essays on the social history of colonial Africa. Their common thread is cotton production and its effects on those who grew it. The fields of African social history and colonial history are, of course, well tended areas of study. This is not true of the history of agriculture in Africa, but thanks to Allen Isaacman and Richard Roberts we now have access to more yarns spun about the history of cotton than about any other cultivated plant. Isaacman and Roberts, both authors of books on the history of cotton,[1] jointly organized a conference on the social history of cotton in 1992 and edited this collection of resulting essays.

The introduction by the editors serves notice that this book deals with "colonial cotton regimes," and their relations with African producers, but also promises insights into a broad range of important topics. Three themes are particularly important: that colonial states struggled with African producers over the allocation of their labor and disposal of their crop, that cotton cultivation and measures mandating it were onerous to producing households, and that colonial rulers did not procure the supply of cotton they wanted.

Conceivably, these topics could warrant many treatments, but the approach here is explicitly one of social history: "Our task as social historians is to put African cotton growers--in the fields they worked, as part of the families with whom they lived, and with the communities whose webs of social relations defined their experiences--firmly into our scholarship and to try and capture the meanings of their experiences" (p. 3). The editors assert that this subject can enhance the field of social history, providing "a lens through which to compare the variety of African responses to coercion and incentives, the methods by which Africans carved out spaces for their own lives, and the ways in which Africans actually helped to shape both colonial cotton policies and their outcomes" (p. 30).

The first section, called "Colonial Policies and African Realities," begins with a brief chapter by Philip Porter, explaining that the tropics were far from ideal for cotton. Photo-synthetic requirements made the mid-latitudes much better suited

to its cultivation. Porter concludes: "The only 'comparative advantage' the tropical colonies had was the ability of the colonizers to exploit labor and thereby the affect the price of production" (p. 49). Subsequent articles in this section show that labor exploitation was not easy. Colonizers had difficulties providing sufficient incentives to direct African labor toward cotton production. Growing cotton for export was consistently uneconomical, and African farmers thwarted elaborate plans to boost production.

For example, Jan Hogendorn tells the remarkable tale of farmers in northern Nigeria taking advantage of the benefits of a colonial cotton campaign--to market groundnuts. This case illustrates the difficulty of fostering cotton exports without coercion. Groundnuts were more remunerative than cotton, required less labor, and could be eaten, depending on household needs. To the frustration of cotton boosters, the railway constructed for cotton transport gave farmers a new outlet for this preferred crop. New wealth from groundnuts fed a local market for cloth, further cutting cotton exports. This preference to sell in domestic, or parallel, markets becomes a motif in the other West African cases in this volume.

Donna Maier explores another pre-World War I case, of Togolese farmers frustrating German planners. She attributes an initial response to colonial markets to female farmers who included cotton as a secondary crop in their fields. However, without further incentives, cotton exports did not increase to compete with the local market or with exports of palm products. The chapter by M. Anne Pitcher looks at the inadequacy of coercive policies and the adoption of other methods in Mozambique and Angola after World War II. More than other pieces in this volume, this chapter concentrates on colonial policy makers rather than African producers.

The Gezira Scheme in the Sudan, as discussed by Victoria Bernal, differs from the other cases in that Britain remade the landscape with a huge (420,000 hectares) irrigation project. In Gezira between 1925 and 1956, tenants produced under terms dictated by the state, but these terms falsely assumed the population consisted of subsistence producers who would respond positively to cash crop opportunities. The scheme faltered over its cotton-growing requirements. Cotton cultivation demanded much labor, and Sudanese labor was not free, as planners assumed, but directed toward other, more profitable, activities. Because it was required, production continued, but with minimal effort.

Chapters Seven though Ten constitute the second part of the volume, titled "Struggles over Labor, Struggles over Markets." The case studies in this section illustrate intervention by the colonial cotton regimes to increase production, and explores how cultivators experienced these measures. The case study of the Rufiji Basin of Tanzania, by Thaddeus Sunseri, introduces plantation cultivation to this volume. Here, plantation and peasant cultivation of cotton existed in tension. Sunseri details the compulsion by German rulers which led Africans to plant some cotton. He also describes how peasants retained the advantage in access to the labor supply, while plantations failed to gain benefit from mechanization or state policy. Yet, despite the peasants' relative strength, they were cautious of cotton, for growing it could threaten their food supply.

Much of the pre-existing historiography of cotton has emphasized colonial coercion, a theme underplayed by the essays highlighted thus far in this review, yet several essays in this section do consider coercive intervention. The essay by Isaacman and Arlindo Chilundo examines Portuguese coercive policies and their demise in northern Mozambique from 1938-1961. This essay succeeds in exploring the experience of cotton growers in the fields and in their web of social relationships. The authors explore the methods of cultivation, outlining the environmental and labor constraints on cotton production and also an-

alyzing the effects of the work calendar on daily life. Aware that chiefs and commoners, men and women, entrepreneurs and impoverished households had different experiences of cotton production, they argue that despite coercion, producers retained a degree of autonomy.

The chapter which puts the most emphasis on coercive policies, by Osumaka Likaka, takes colonial Zaire as its case. However, brutality is not the main subject, but is portrayed as one of many tactics of social control used by the state to increase production. Most interesting is his description of cotton propaganda based on African harvest festivals, although it was never sufficient to overcome awareness that cotton was un-economical.

Certain aspects of these articles on coercion reveal tensions in the field of social history. For example, Isaacman and Chilundo establish coping and struggling as different categories of response to cotton coercion (pp. 175-79). The authors recognize the problem of categorization based upon an assessment of intentionality, and recognize that human action is fraught with ambiguity, however, they do not consider how this dichotomy compares with the increasingly questioned paradigm of collaboration and resistance.

That this paradigm requires critical evaluation is evident from the essay by Likaka. It is absolutely undeniable that cotton production in the Belgian Congo was a brutal affair, but his understanding of all cotton policy as social control contradicts the arguments made by other authors in this volume that cultivators were able to find autonomous space within the cotton regime. Cotton production in this essay is always understood as exploitative. For example, his analysis of production rewards fails to consider how material incentives might have made participation in its production actually attractive to certain members of society. The interpretation of rewards of tools is that they were given "less to provide the technology needed to produce cotton than to manipulate consciousness" (p. 214).

That Europeans in colonial Africa attempted to manipulate consciousness is not news, and how African consciousness changed in the colonial period makes a fascinating study. However, any possible analysis of consciousness is stymied by characterizing those Africans who participated in and benefited from the colonial cotton regime as "collaborators" (p. 205).

The essay by Roberts on Mali between 1928 and 1932 continues the exploration of struggles over cotton production, however, while the other three essays in this section consider labor, this one looks at markets. The blurry line between incentives and coercion (the flip side of the difficult demarcation between collaboration and resistance) is evident in the policy of the French colonial regime, which was officially committed to free markets. Roberts explores the manifestation of this policy in colonial cotton fairs, which he describes as a "bizarre" (p. 226) form of a free market. (A bizarre bazaar?) While the cotton fair revealed "the coercion of free markets," it also became less free as the administration fixed minimum prices. An unintended effect of the promotion of longer-staple varieties and mechanical ginning was to increase domestic cotton consumption. Roberts's discussion of the domestic textile industry includes an interesting consideration of the changing duties of men and women. That handicraft textile production remained robust is evident in that ***imports*** of cotton yarn into Mali significantly increased in the late 1920s!

The last section of the book, subtitled "Cotton, Food Security and Reproduction of Rural Communities," begins with an essay by Thomas J. Bassett which continues the examination of the interplay between colonial and domestic markets. More than the preceding Malian case, this study of a similar situation in Cote d'Ivoire highlights coercion in production and export marketing. Force temporarily increased cotton exports, but at the cost of food shortages. The more remunerative parallel market precluded permanent gains. Bas-

sett's essay makes a welcome contribution to the volume by explaining the techniques of cultivation, by describing the fields, and how coercion changed planting systems.

Jamie Monson's piece gives the most attention to planting schedules and techniques, but her discussion of cultivation in Tanzania's Kilombero valley, may surprise the reader by paying greater attention to rice than cotton! However this attention to rice is well justified for it places cotton export production in the context of the wider agricultural and tenure system. The resulting essay offers an analysis of social stratification which avoids "the simple binary focus of earlier resistance/compliance models, seeing farmers as active agents within local, regional, and ultimately international circuits of social and political economy" (p. 269).

Elias Mandala's study of changes in production and marketing in two districts of colonial Malawi explains how a situation of increasing poverty and hunger accompanied cotton commodity production in the 1940s and 1950s. This essay shows how people retained autonomy by providing the cotton grown "in their own gardens," and also how food supplies declined as cotton increased. Mandala's conclusion analyzes the development of the cash crop economy in the context of actions by the state, merchant capital and peasants.

The triangulation of cotton, colonialism and social history in this volume deserves some comment. As this interplay works itself out, it is evident that cotton, the crop, is the junior partner of the threesome: the period of colonial rule and social arrangements arising from it determine the questions about the history of cotton cultivation. The benefit of the unequal triangulation is a volume featuring several state-of-the-art essays in colonial social history.

Readers will be grateful for this contribution, not least because the book sheds some light on the nascent field of African agricultural history. Consider James McCann's 1991 review of that subject: "For the most part, African agricultural history has been subsumed in the past two decades under broader rubrics of economic, social, or political history. ... The emphasis on agriculture as a function of political economy has, understandably for the sake of source material and chronological proximity to current conditions, tended to concentrate on the period of colonial engagement to the exclusion of longer term trends rooted in ecology."[2] With the exception of the essays in the last section, which reflect upon cotton growing in its context in African fields and diets, McCann's comment applies to this volume.

Of course, it would not be fair to criticize a volume which explicitly defines itself as social history for failing as an agricultural history. However, the final essays in the volume show that agricultural approach can enhance the practice of social history. Also, an agricultural approach might call the third side of the triangle, colonialism, into question. As McCann points out, agricultural history reveals continuities between the pre-colonial and colonial periods.[3]

Cotton certainly received much colonial attention, but this book's great emphasis on the colonial cotton regime obscures other questions about its history in Africa. For example, while the importance of domestic markets is repeatedly affirmed, the social impact of these markets in the precolonial and colonial period is under explored. The attention to European administration obscured these important questions about the social history of cotton. Broadening the scope beyond colonial relations also might have alleviated troubles arising from the collaboration-resistance paradigm.

Notes:

[1]. Allen Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938-1961* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996); Richard Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional*

Economy of the French Soudan (Stanford,: Stanford University, 1996).

[2]. James C. McCann, "Agriculture and African History" *Journal of African History* 32(1991): 507.

[3]. McCann, p. 513.