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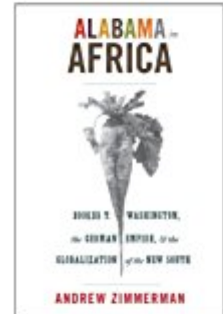
Andrew Zimmerman. *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. 416 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-12362-2.



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The 1990s witnessed a flourishing of scholarship about cotton and its role in the European colonization of Africa. "Cotton colonialism" historiography was part of a broader set of questions about peasants and social change in colonial Africa that concentrated on historical processes in agrarian communities, and in particular, on establishing causality with respect to historical change. The history of peasantries is an especially Westernized historiography, because although agricultural production is a universal phenomenon, the processes of social change involving peasants are often viewed as feeding directly into industrialization and modernization. Peasant studies has traditionally been an especially modernist discourse.

In Germany during the mid to late nineteenth century there was an upsurge of political and philosophical interest in expansion and colonization that gave rise to agricultural settlement schemes. As Polish women moved west to work on German farms, politicians and social theorists struggled with how to reverse the trend and move Germans, and indeed Germany, eastward. Almost simultaneously, in the postbellum American South, in the wake of Reconstruction's unraveling, white and black politicians and sociologists advanced competing schemes for modernization and the amelioration of the socioeconomic condition of newly free rural African Americans. So whereas some scholars will likely read Andrew Zimmerman for his contribution to knowledge about imperial Germany, social theory, or African American economic and political advancement, I approach his book with the eye of an Africanist who has puzzled for over a decade with how to interpret Togoland's curious "Tuskegee Experiment."

Early Africanist historians of colonial agriculture wrote within the tradition of underdevelopment theory, which associated changes within peasant societies and their eventual demise with the colonial conquest. These theories were popular in the 1970s, but historians have since moved away from simplicity and monocausality to diverse social complexity. Peasant societies came to

be seen as far more dynamic, in a constant state of fluctuation from their very origins. Changes were interpreted not the result of external forces, but as an inherent part of local society, characterized by struggles for power and competition over resources. The latter was a key concern for African historians in the 1990s, and it was a co-progenitor of the emergence of African environmental history as a distinct subfield (from David Schoenbrun to Jim McCann).[1]

Zimmerman's important new book brings a fresh perspective to the historiography of cotton and colonialism, upending much of it in innovative and compelling ways. He writes with the perspective of a European intellectual and political historian, but is firmly grounded in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. history. He connects agricultural history to literature on ethnicity, race, gender, and the family. In examining how a West African German colony of relative economic insignificance was thrust center-stage into debates about modernity, nationalism, racism, native uplift, and colonial capitalism, Zimmerman returns the reader to much earlier framings of the role of cotton in global movements of ideas, commerce, and people. And in so doing, he raises questions about the continuing validity of area studies-driven historiography. The book is replete with insight, novelty, and sophistication.

Zimmerman examines the context of a short-lived agricultural experiment in Togo whereby African American educators in Alabama and imperialist bureaucrats and economists in Germany imagined the transformation of primarily subsistence rural communities into commercially viable cotton farmsteads and their inhabitants into sharecroppers. In a nutshell, a small group of Tuskeegee agronomists came from Alabama to Togo to teach cotton-farming techniques to Ewe communities. The Germans employed various mechanisms to enforce attendance at the new technical agricultural school, and created settlement schemes in an area that had recently been devastated by a German-led military invasion. But Ewe men and women resisted attempts to co-opt them into the expanded machinery of the German colonial project in creative ways.

In his analysis, Zimmerman taps a prolific vein of African historiography. From works by Polly Hill in the 1960s, to Sara Berry and Gareth Austin, scholarship on West African indigenous agricultural systems has been the site of rich and rewarding theory and empirical nuance.[2] Since Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons' collection of essays in the 1970s, the discourse of underdevelopment theory has broadly contended that sub-Saharan Africa suffers from underdevelopment as a result of colonial conquest.[3] While they shied away from underdevelopment in its crudest form à la Walter Rodney, they asserted that dependency theory was useful. Not only did they reject the dualist model whereby "modern" and "traditional" economies were in tension, but they also argued that many elements of precapitalist society survived and co-existed within the context of emerging capitalist economies.[4]

While the model proposed by Palmer and Parson was extremely problematic insofar as it victimized the African peasantry, they paved the way for others to investigate how broader processes, such as colonial capitalism, shaped peasants. Colin Bundy took up this challenge and explored how the South African colonial state, desirous of a proletariat, promoted settler agriculture and imposed rents and other fees on the peasantry, making farming increasingly unprofitable.[5] Bundy's strangulation thesis argued that had the markets been left alone, African peasants would have continued to prosper, a story later picked up by Charles van Onselen.[6] It is into this contentious terrain that Zimmerman wades when he explores how Togolese farmers responded to pressures--from physical violence to economic incentives and every conceivable form of coercion and leverage in between--to become export-oriented agriculturalists and nuclear domestic pro-

duction units. And we are subtly reminded that, unlike peanuts in the South, or beets in Upper Silesia, no one eats cotton.

But for Zimmerman, the West African peasant farmer is not the traditional category whereby one explores colonial rule; rather s/he constitutes a unit of analysis for competing ideologies and policies of labor value. Comprising five substantive chapters, richly in archival research--two set in the United States, two focused on Europe, and one in Togo--the book's structure evokes the rare and daring comparative frameworks of George Fredrickson and James Campbell.[7] It is in terms of comparative history that the author makes his greatest contribution. As a mature work, (and not a revised dissertation), Zimmerman has taken great pains to elaborate and connect the common themes that draw three vastly different and previously unconnected communities together in a common project. The comparative framework, however, is, I would venture to say, something of a novelty. Rather than look at how two similar ideas grew in tandem and experienced processes of cross-fertilization--the foundational literature of trans-Atlantic Pan-Africanism comes to mind--he carefully cocoons a colonial case study with the silk of coterminous American and German narratives about common political and social anxieties.

Zimmerman deftly deploys his central Togo chapter as an anchor connecting racist ideologies in Bismarck's Germany and post-*Plessy* United States, to industrial education, the civilizing mission, and the post-Versailles globalization of segregation. Whereas Polly Hill's study of Ghanaian migrant cocoa growers developed the theme of indigenous farmers as economic innovators, demonstrating how they straddled two worlds, Fred Cooper and Allen Isaacman encouraged scholars to adopt terminology that more accurately reflected the characters of study.[8] Peasantries could be the wretchedly poor and the moderately prosperous, the progressive and the reactionary. The only specificity of the term "peasant" is its ambiguity.

Zimmerman says the imagined peasantry can also be an interlocutor in a much larger set of overlapping global conversations. If anything, the focus on peasants in the1980s, from Elias Mandala to Meghan Vaughan, gave Africanists a strong sense that African agriculture was never static.[9] The oral history of the Togolese people, some of which Zimmerman himself collected, like those Vaughn interviewed in Malawi, depicts forced agricultural change as a social crisis, in which the breakdown of the most basic social relationships resulted in the suffering of thousands; and is a social crisis that can only be rendered intelligible by recourse to grander globalizing transformations. Indeed Zimmerman pushes back the German-African colonial encounter, both temporally and geographically, into post-Reconstruction Alabama and pre-Bismarckian Poland.

At its core, Zimmerman's narrative is one of the repeated failures of a fleeting Euro-American hegemonic pact to implement a synthesis of internal and external paradigms of colonization from the U.S. South and Prussian *Ost*. In Togo, science and ideology mingled; German colonizers and a small group of African American agricultural specialists were armed with the knowledge that cotton could be grown "scientifically." A central assumption undergirding the agricultural program, which ran circa 1901-14, was that Togolese Africans could be reconstructed as "Negroes," with a core "authentic" culture and biology (p. 134). Cotton farming was a ***Volkskultur***, and one that was thus transferable because "black people imitate others more readily than white people" (p. 137); they were abounding in ***Bildungsfähigkeit***.

Neither the grand scheme of Germany's Verein für Sozialpolitik to turn the Ewe into a *Volk* of *Ansiedler*, mirroring the Prussian program of *Sachsengänger*, nor Booker T. Washington's and the Tuskegee Institute's agenda to uplift Togo's

farmers of cotton and other market-oriented products, was effective or relevant. Zimmerman's farmers are thusly less the intellectuals of Steven Feierman's majestic study, but more closely the disengaged and recalcitrant small-scale producers explored by Richard Roberts in French Soudan, Allen Isaacman in Mozambique, and Ousmaka Likaka in Congo.[10] Notwithstanding, like Feierman, Zimmerman richly demonstrates how the African actors made it all (im)possible, and created and recreated colonial, racist, and modernization discourses.

Sara Berry famously asserted that peasant societies have always been sites of contested access to resources and struggles over power, many of which predate colonialism. Colonial officials, Germans included, knew very little about the local dynamics operating in African villages. But as *No Condition is Permanent* (1993) is the comparative analytical product par excellence of area studies specialization, Zimmerman's approach raises questions about the continued validity of prevailing modus operandi in the discipline. If such creative insight can be brought to bear on African historical processes without the requisite year or more *in situ*, what does the future hold for area studies programs, the recent cancellation of 2011-12 Fulbright-Hayes and SCALI programs notwithstanding?

In spite of the tortured Tuskegee tale, cotton continues to be an important economic activity in modern Togo, and a source of important foreign revenue. Whereas the specific scheme may have failed to materialize in the manner in which it was envisioned, its ideological and philosophical antecedents and its political and cultural consequences are numerous and expansive. Zimmerman path-breaking work shows that a cotton scheme comprising few Togolese, fewer Germans, and even fewer African Americans, set the tone for attitudes toward Africa, Africans, and African engagement with globalizing capitalism in the context of late colonialism for decades to come. And it is precisely in this way that he reveals that although indeed quite remote, Togo's past and present is exceptionally global.[11]

Notes

[1]. David Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998); James McCann, *Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500-2000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[2]. Polly Hill, *Migrant Cocoa-Farmers of Southern Ghana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963); Sara Berry, *No Condition Is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993); Gareth Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807-1956* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005).

[3]. Robin H. Palmer and Neil Parsons, eds., *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

[4]. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1981).

[5]. Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

[6]. Charles van Onselen, *The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997).

[7]. George Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[8]. Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanz-*

ibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890-1925 (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997); Allen Isaacman, "Peasants and Rural Social Protest in Africa," in F. Cooper et al., *Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labor, And The Capitalist World System* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

[9]. Elias Mandala, *Work and Control In A Peasant Economy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Meghan Vaughan, *The Story of an African Famine: Gender and Famine in Twentieth-Century Malawi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[10]. Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Richard L. Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional Economy in the French Soudan, 1800-1946* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Allen Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938-1961* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995); Ousmaka Likaka, *Rural Society and Cotton in Colonial Zaire* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997).

[11]. Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999)--perhaps the most important book on Togo to date, and curiously absent from Zimmerman's bibliography.

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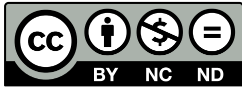

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