

GLOBALISATION AND COTTON PRODUCTION IN AFRICA IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. Introduction

In this lecture I will concentrate on cotton, an agricultural raw material that prominently figures in the literature on unequal exchange and its effects for countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to UNCTAD's compilations, there were some seven poor African countries for which cotton was a leading export item in the late 1990s, i.e. Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mozambique, Sudan and Togo (1). While a part of these African LDCs (Least Developed Countries) have exported cotton towards central economies ever since colonial times, some have entered the field after their formal independence, in the context of a strategy of horizontal diversification (2). Since cotton moreover has clearly been one of the agricultural raw materials, Southern exports of which in the era of *globalisation* have continued to be effected by changing terms of international trade, there is, I believe, sufficient reason to devote a separate lecture to this primary commodity, as part of my series on the consequences of globalization for the African continent.

Below I will seek to put the strategies of Sub-Saharan African countries, which export raw cotton, into a historical perspective. This is necessary, because the current debate on globalization does not only ignore some of the worst forms of exploitation of Southern economies, it at times also appears to be ahistoric, ignoring the very history of globalization as the process of the building of one integrated world economy. Yet the example of cotton, and the research undertaken by historians on the social history of cotton cultivation in Africa, quite well brings out, that pressures to orient local agricultural production towards external markets, towards consumer demands in the North, much pre-date the present era of officially-championed *globalisation*. Hence, a review, even of only very brief, of the history of export-oriented cotton cultivation in Africa should be helpful towards deepening the discussion on the nature and the drawbacks of Northern-imposed, globally-oriented commodity production.

2. Metropolitan Interests and the Cultivation of Cotton in African Colonies

In the five decades between the end of the 19th century and the end of the Second World War, the European colonial powers which had carved up the African continent commonly promoted export-oriented cotton cultivation in their African colonies. Initiated, it appears, primarily by the British, the dominant imperial power, efforts to develop cotton schemes were made with equal vigour by France, Belgium, Germany and Portugal. One can thus speak of parallel colonial initiatives, each aimed at turning Europe's colonies into a supply base of raw cotton for the textile industries of the

respective metropolises. Two factors were mainly responsible for this mushrooming of colonial cotton schemes, i.e. the cotton famine which erupted in the 1860s and the creation of protective tariff walls by competing European powers in the two subsequent decades. Both factors have been spelled clearly out by Allen Isaacman and Richard Roberts, in their lucid introduction to the social history of cotton colonialism in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The cotton famine of 1861-1865 is indeed known as 'one of the industrial world's first raw materials' crisis' (3). As Isaacman and Roberts recall, raw cotton prices skyrocketed, spinning and weaving mills were closed, and many of the newly proletarianized factory workers throughout most of the European textile industries were impoverished. Whether the 'famine' was really a supply crisis, caused by the Northern blockade of ports in the Southern part of the US, or whether it was rather to be understood as a cyclical business crisis, fact is that the period from 1861 to 1865 witnessed a significant regression in imports of cotton into Europe. Consequently, European states became more interested in securing the necessary raw cotton for metropolitan textile industries than they had been before. Pressed by textile industrialists, metropolitan and colonial administrations, before the end of the American civil war, had devised plans to encourage cotton production in the colonies.

The second factor that is cited by Isaacman and Roberts as causative factor behind the development of colonial cotton schemes, was the regime of protective tariffs instituted in the 1870s and 1880s (4). Obstacles to the free flow of international trade were created by most of Europe's industrializing powers. Bilateral tariff treaties proliferated, in contravention of the principle of free trade. Only Great Britain, which reportedly stood to gain most from free trade, continued to uphold its ideology. As history brings out, imperialist countries have never upheld the principle of free trade consistently, but have shifted policies in accordance with the class interests with which their governments identified most. In any case, the new wave of protectionism which reached its height in the later part of the 19th century, too contributed to a feeling of uncertainty over the supply of cotton raw materials, and encouraged colonial governments to institute schemes that would help ensure that the textile industries existing in the metropolis receive a regular raw cotton supply.

Against the above background, each European colonial power established similar public and private efforts to promote cotton in their colonies. An initiative that reportedly served as a kind of model for private-public collaboration was the British Cotton Growers Association, founded by British textile interests (1902), which amongst others intervened directly in the British colonies in West Africa, and which also is reported to have championed cotton cultivation in the Sudan. Again, French industrialists, following in the footsteps of the BCGA, formed their own Association Cotonniere Coloniale (in 1903), and German and Portuguese textile interests too pushed for cotton programs in Africa (5). On the basis of the evidence presented by Isaacman and Roberts it can easily be surmised that the development of export-oriented cotton schemes in European colonies in Africa was premised on the need for ensured cotton supplies by

industries in the metropolises. This is how African cotton production was 'globalised', how the continent came to actively participate in the world cotton trade!

3. Violation of 'Free Trade'-Principles: Colonial States and the Marketing of Cotton

Let's now see how colonial policies to promote cotton cultivation for exports were shaped. One level at which colonial rulers in Africa interfered was that of the marketing of cotton produce. To be attractive to metropolitan users, as Isaacman and Roberts state, colonial cotton needed to be graded, cleaned and pressed in accordance with international standards. Here, efforts were partly concentrated at establishing cotton ginneries and cotton presses to make bales. These establishments for the processing of raw cotton were not only important for the cleaning of the raw cotton; the cotton gins also served as a mechanism for the selection of the best cotton seeds for the next harvest (6). Yet quality control also took very different forms, more directly in contradiction with free market principles. Although this is mentioned by Isaacman and Roberts only in passing, the authors do mention that quality control often took the form of monopsony, meaning that state marketing boards or other official buyers were awarded *monopoly* buying rights over specific rural areas (7).

Another, very common reason for colonial state interference in the marketing of raw cotton was the persistent competition from the side of local producers of cotton clothes. Both cotton cultivation, and the spinning and weaving of cotton long predated the coming of European colonizers to Africa (8). Several accounts drawn from countries that were colonized by different European powers, attest to the fact that local handicraft production of textile goods often survived and continued to exist, even while colonial rulers tried to gear local cotton production towards exports to the metropolis. Thus, local producers to an extent competed with the export sector for control over the same cotton harvest. And since the goal of having Africans produce for the metropolis was 'never seriously questioned', by none of the colonial powers, the state was led to interfere directly so as to ensure that a sufficiently large supply of raw cotton was forthcoming. It was (once again) led to violate the *laissez-faire* principles which had been Europe's capitalist ideology since the 19th century.

Isaacman and Roberts specify two types of interference in cotton marketing which both were quite common. One method of interference related, they state to the wide fluctuations in prevailing world cotton market prices. In order to even out such fluctuations and offer the cultivators a kind of insurance against price falls, colonial officials took to fixing prices to be paid to the producers (9). However, they also used a second method, which was rather connected to competition from the domestic market and the persistent 'diversion' of the cotton harvest to local handicraft producers. This was the use of direct *coercion*. Even where the colonial rulers had initially tried to operate on the basis of free market principles, these in practice were abandoned in the interest of metropolitan textile industries, and European colonial rulers, rather unanimously it appears, resorted to the method of force, insisting that African cotton producers bring their cotton harvest to marketing places, as determined by the colonial state.

Isaacman and Roberts cite evidence from diverse regions in Africa to illustrate this point. Given higher prices in the domestic market, French officials in much of West Africa after the First World War abandoned their free market strategy. They ‘combined coercive measures and market reforms in an effort to capture cotton and suppress the indigenous textile industry. Local administrators pressured, and in some cases compelled, Africans to bring their fiber to the official cotton market’ (10). Again, in East Africa, where the tradition of free trade reportedly was less well established, German and British intervention in the market started early on. In Tanganyika, the German rulers directed all peasants to weigh their crop at government stations before selling it to local merchants. And in the Congo, where as we will see below colonial cotton policies were most violent, the peasants were forced to carry their produce to (a very limited number of) company markets, established under the guidance of the Belgian authorities. And although the admixture between reliance on price-policies and reliance on state-force varied, in the end not a single European colonial state refrained from interference in market processes.

4. The Cultivation of Cotton and the Application of Force: Congo vs Sudan

In this summary review of cotton colonialism in Africa, I can do no more than very briefly refer to a few examples to illustrate how European colonizers at times grossly interfered with local cultivation practices in order to achieve their objective of raw cotton exports. A wellknown case where brute force was applied, is that of the Belgian Congo. Here, the colonial state and the twelve cotton concessionary companies to whom the Belgian authorities had given de facto police power, initiated a campaign of state-sanctioned terror and violence, so as to stimulate production. The state-concessionary alliance fully prescribed how peasants had to clear the land, how to hoe and weed, and how to harvest the crop. Production prescriptions were enforced through an elaborate system of crop supervisors and cotton monitors. Where peasants failed to comply, they became the victim of legally sanctioned violence, such as whipping or imprisonment. For almost two decades, the stated objective of the Belgian colonial rulers was, as Likaka states, ‘to instill terror in order to fit peasants into a format of economic exploitation’ (11).

Another case and model that I wish to mention briefly, is that of the British cotton regime in Sudan. Here, the British rulers, after an initial experiment undertaken in the first decade of the 20th century, devised huge irrigation schemes with a view to promoting the cultivation of cotton. Background to the policy, according to Norman O’Neill, was that British manufacturers based in Lancashire increasingly specialized in the manufacture of fine cotton thread, which required long staple varieties of cotton, and the Sudanese colony was selected as a source for the supply for the given variety (12). The most wellknown and most massive of the irrigation schemes established by the British was the Gezira scheme, which by the end of the colonial period reportedly encompassed a population of about 25 thousand tenant households, as well as a large force of migrant labourers (13). The Gezira scheme was a kind of island in the Sudanese colonial economy, fully embodying Britain’s export-oriented cotton ‘development’ endeavours.

Through three decades leading up to the country's political independence in 1956, raw cotton formed a reported 70 percent of Sudan's total export earnings. No less than 80 percent of these earnings were contributed by the Gezira scheme (14).

The Gezira scheme, as Victoria Bernal's account brings out well, heralded the development of capitalist relations at the expense of previously existing substance production in the region. Whereas the British rulers were guided by the vision of a self-contained society of cotton producers 'stretching for miles and miles along monotonous and precise irrigation canals', - prior to the introduction of the scheme the Gezira plains had been part of a diverse economy. Nomads used the Gezira as seasonal pasture, while peasants spread over three ecological zones grew a wide variety of agricultural crops. Through the Land Ordinance they promulgated, the British colonial rulers disrupted pastoral systems, deprived the peasants of the Gezira plains of their former land rights, and *forced* the former small holders into a system of commodity production (15). Thus, the basis for cotton cultivation under the Gezira scheme, far from having been laid through the free interplay of market forces or the natural growth of a commodity economy, was (once again) laid through direct intervention of the colonial state.

Again, the production relations in the Gezira irrigation scheme left little freedom to the producers, although it did not operate on the basis of brute violence, as was the case in the Congo. Cultivation was officially managed by a private company, the Sudan Plantation Syndicate, which allotted standard plots to tenants, a third of which were to be under cotton. Although the tenants were entitled to a share in the profits from the scheme, and were supplied with irrigation water and other production inputs, contractual terms were all defined by the Syndicate. Farmers had little or no say over which crops to grow, how much to plant, or when to carry out the various agricultural operations. In reality then, the structure of the Gezira was a rigid hierarchical bureaucracy, with the tenants and wage labourers at the bottom end. Implemented in order to serve the needs of British industry, it was indeed an extensive scheme of social engineering, illustrating that European colonial rulers in Africa not only interfered with the marketing of raw cotton, but frequently interfered with labour processes in the cultivation of cotton as well.

Contemporary Sudan, Unequal and Disparate Exchange

Having described the historical emergence of cotton as Sudan's main export commodity, I now need to review briefly how Sudan is affected by globalisation today. First, although cotton cultivation has faced some ups and downs, and although the country's post-independence government is reported to have experimented with import-substitution as method to transform the country's economy, cotton-exports have continued to occupy a central place in the country's international trade, right from the year of Sudan's declaration of independence from colonial rule, and up to the later part of the 1980s. For instance, in the years between 1983 and 1987 – years for which data have been cited by Craig – the share of cotton in overall exports went down, from more than 50% in 1983 to 42,1% in 1987, but continued to represent almost double the share of the

country's second main export item, *gum Arabic* (16). On the whole, then, cotton held fast to its position as principal export item until it was replaced by oil, in 1999 (17)).

Further, the negative consequences of Sudan's incessant reliance on cotton exports can also be pinpointed without difficulty. For cotton is typically one of those primary products exported from Least Developed Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, which in recent decades has registered a (further) fall in its international price. Whereas according to Kox the price of cotton on the world market rose in the decade of the 1970s, it faced a severe price fall between 1981 and 1987 (18). Again, the price of cotton also dropped between 1997 and 1999, years covered by the UNCTAD's report on Least Developed Countries, published in 2002. The price-fall over this short three-year period was as much as 34%! Both periods mentioned are relevant for our discussion on Sudan, since, as indicated, through the decades of the 1980s and 1990s cotton continued to be Sudan's main export item. Thus, one can only conclude that Sudan's main export item during these decades must have been affected by unequal exchange in a major way. In fact, the price-fall through 1997 to 1999 reportedly was more dramatic than that for all agricultural raw materials combined (19).

Yet it would be wrong to believe that the negative impact of globalization for Sudan has been limited to the detrimental effects of the changing terms of international trade. As explained elsewhere, Sudan's civil war between the government army and rebel forces in the country's Southern region was resumed in the 1983, i.e. at a time when cotton was still the country's main export item (20). The civil war also raged through the decade of 1990s, i.e. before the government's war efforts were bolstered by the initiation of oil exports in 1999. And since civil war raged unabated through this 16-year period, it is more than likely that Sudan's military government allocated (a part of) the income earned through cotton exports towards the imports of arms and ammunition, required for the internal war against Southern rebels. Although concrete evidence needs to be gathered in order to be able to assert this with full confidence, in view of the ongoing civil war it may well be hypothesized that Sudan's cotton wealth was indirectly exchanged for social waste, for arms.

Hence, the case of Sudan's cotton exports through the civil war period from 1983 to 1999 may well represent a case where an African country has suffered the *combined* consequences of two imperialist trading mechanisms at the very same time, being *unequal* and *disparate* exchange. If confirmed, this means that one may draw a straight line from the introduction of an export-oriented economic strategy under (British) colonial rule and all the disruptive consequences it entailed for the inhabitants of Sudan's Gezira plain, - to the operation of those two contemporary trading mechanism which together are creating havoc for the people of Sub-Saharan African states. Thus, the example of Sudan once more indicates that unequal exchange and disparate exchange in many cases do '*co-exist*', that the problems created by the integration of Southern countries into the world economy need to be put into a historical perspective, and that the emergence of disparate exchange as method of economic exploitation is firmly rooted in the past.

6. Conclusion

In the above lecture I have put the problems created by globalization in Africa into a historical perspective, by focusing on the cultivation and export of cotton. To this end, I have briefly highlighted common strands in the policies which European rulers implemented in their individual African colonies, and have further summarized the case of the Sudan. If free market principles prescribe that the choice in favour of, or against, the sale of their produce on the market is to be made by peasants and farmers autonomously, - then one cannot say that the rulers of central capitalist economies who colonized Africa implemented these principles with any degree of consistency. In fact, to a smaller or larger extent, force was applied in order to impose cotton as single, mono-cultural crop on African cultivators of the soil. Thus, the ideology of the free market which is being preached so loudly by governments of Northern states today is not grounded in history, but is contradicted by the practices implemented by these governments' precursors during colonial times.

On the other hand, the very idea of *globalization*, of targeting economic progress through an orientation of production towards the export of commodities, is very deeply rooted in colonial history. While the history of export-oriented cotton cultivation in Africa is not widely known, historians have meanwhile unearthed a whole pattern in the efforts of European colonial rulers throughout Africa. Each colonial ruler was keenly interested in using his colony or colonies as a source for the supply of cheap cotton for textile manufacturers at home. Each, in one way or another sought to impose export-oriented cotton cultivation, disregarding pre-existing methods and people's desires. And whereas some may argue that production for the world market, as propagated so eagerly by proponents of globalization, is a recent recipe, - in fact export-oriented development was central to the thinking of the colonizers who caved up the African continent at the end of the 19th century. Hence, globalization as policy-prescription should be dated from the late 19th century *at least*.

The example of Sudan perfectly illustrates the continuum that exists between globalization in colonial times, and dependence on globalization more recently, in post-colonial days. Although oil has meanwhile replaced cotton as principle export item, the orientation on oil exports which Sudan's military rulers have espoused since 1999 forms a perfect continuum with the orientation on commodity exports as introduced by British colonial rulers in the early part of the 20th century. For as the data recorded in books on Sudan's economic history bring out, cotton exports have formed the mainstay of Sudan's exports all through the decades from the 1920s to the mid-1950s, when Great Britain ruled the country, and through the next three decades, from 1956 to 1989, when the country has been governed by indigenous rulers. Hence, the exploitation of Sudan via *unequal* exchange (via cotton), and via *disparate* exchange (via cotton and oil) are rooted in history, and can only be fully understood against the background of the historic imposition of export-oriented production by the country's former colonial rulers.

In this lecture I have highlighted the need for a historical approach towards the understanding of Africa's integration in the global economy. Whereas it is wrong to

argue that African countries have insufficiently integrated themselves into the world economy (21), - it is equally wrong to discuss the exploitation of African resources via contemporary trading mechanisms without taking the continent's history into account. For in the final analysis, both the system of unequal exchange and that of disparate exchange, which latter mechanism in some case has replaced, but often coexists with unequal exchange, are rooted in the history of the continent, in particular in its colonial history. Hence, it is essential for the worldwide movement against the detrimental consequences of the ongoing process of globalization, to place poverty, deprivation and destruction caused by the mentioned two trading mechanisms, in the context of the continent's history since its complete colonization by European powers, in the later part of the 19th century.

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(1) UNCTAD, *The Least Developed Countries Report 2002. Escaping the Poverty Trap* (United Nations, New York and Geneva, 2002), p.109;

(2) Henk L.M.Kox, *Export Constraints for Subsaharan Growth. The Role of Non-Fuel Primary Commodities* (Research Memorandum 1990-1991, Free University of Amsterdam, December 1990), p.36; according to Kox, between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, cotton was adopted by 3 extra countries, as part of a strategy of 'horizontal diversification' which tended to heighten competition between Subsaharan African countries themselves;

(3) Allen Isaacman and Richard Roberts, 'Cotton Colonialism and Social History in Subsaharan Africa: Introduction' (in: Allen Isaacman & Richard Roberts (eds.), *Cotton Colonialism and Social History in Subsaharan Africa* – Heinemann, Portsmouth, USA/James Curry, London, UK, 1995), p.7;

(4) Allen Isaacman and Richard Roberts (1995), op.cit., p.8; the issue of the imposition of protective tariffs by European states in the late 19th century is also discussed by Rosa Luxemburg in her Magnum Opus – see Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, Monthly Review Press, 1964, Chapter XXX, 'International Loans', p.419;

(5) Allen Isaacman and Richard Roberts (1995), op.cit., p.9;

(6) *ibid*, p.18;

(7) *ibid*;

(8) Allen Isaacman and Richard Roberts (1995, op.cit.), in a footnote cite evidence from Nile Valley and Nubian sites suggesting that an independent domestication of cotton took place here as early as between 4,000 and 3,500 BC; the spinning and weaving of cotton reportedly were

widespread, amongst others in the Nile Valley and the Horn, already by the twelfth century A.C. (p.11);

(9) *ibid*, p.19;

(10) *ibid*, p.21;

(11) Osumaka Likaka, 'Forced Cotton Cultivation and Social Control' (in: Allen Isaacman & Richard Roberts (1995), *op.cit.*, p.200; for other discussions on the theme of the coercion of African cotton peasants, see eg. M.Anne Pitcher, 'From Coercion to Incentives: The Portuguese Colonial Cotton Regime in Angola and Mozambique, 1946-1974' (in: Allen Isaacman & Richard Roberts (1995), *op.cit.*, p.119; and Richard Roberts, 'The Coercion of Free Markets: Cotton, Peasants, and the Colonial State in the French Soudan, 1924-1932' (in: Allen Isaacman & Richard Roberts (1995), *op.cit.*, p.221;

(12) Norman O'Neil, 'Class and Politics in the Modern History of Sudan' (in: O'Neil & O'Brien, *Economy and Class in Sudan* – Gower Publishing Co., England/USA, 1988, p.32); just like Isaacman and Roberts, Norman O'Neil refers to the British Cotton Growing Association (BCGA) as the 'moving force' behind the British colonial efforts to use Africa, in this case the Sudan, as sources of raw cotton;

(13) Victoria Bernal, 'Cotton and Colonial Order in Sudan: A Social History with Emphasis on the Gezira Scheme' (in: Allen Isaacman & Richard Roberts (1995), *op.cit.*, p.100);

(14) Norman O'Neil (1988), *op.cit.*, p.34;

(15) Victoria Bernal (1995), *op.cit.*, p.103; for another historic account of colonial cotton cultivation in Sudan, see Abdel Basit Saeed, 'Merchant Capital, the State and Peasant Farmers in Southern Kordofan' (in: O'Neil & O'Brien (1988), *op.cit.* p.186;

(16) C.M.Craig, 'The Agriculture of Sudan' (in: C.G.Gordon, ..);

(17) Peter Custers, 'The Civil War in Sudan and the Trading Mechanism of Disparate Exchange' (Lecture at the European Conference of PGA, September, 2002);

(18) Henk L.M.Kox (1990), *op.cit.*, p.22;

(19) UNCTAD (2002), *op.cit.*, p.7;

(20) C.M.Craig (19..), *op.cit.*;

(21) see discussion by the authors of the UNCTAD Report on LDCs – UNCTAD (2002), *op.cit.*, p.102, 'Some Conceptual and Semantic Weaknesses in the Policy Debate on the Relationship between Trade and Poverty'.