

All of Africa's Gods Are Weeping

By E.G. Vallianatos¹

Summary

With about a third of its population hungry – more than 200 million people on the dawn of the 21st century -- sub-Saharan Africa is probably the most impoverished region of the world. Poverty, wars, foreign powers' cold war food politics in the continent, droughts, environmental degradation, rapid population growth, foreign debt, and inappropriate industrial development policies are partly responsible for Africa's massive hunger, but they don't explain it.

The roots of African hunger lie deep in the structure of the most persistent of colonial institutions in the continent -- the export out of sub-Saharan Africa of plantation agricultural cash crops to the markets of Europe and North America. Such agricultural exports are bad for democracy and the land, concentrating political power in a few hands and impoverishing Africa's traditional food and agricultural economy. Scrapping that colonial model of development -- cash cropping -- for a healthier and stronger peasant economy is bound to invigorate both democracy and the raising of food for local consumption. A peasant-driven development strategy is also certain to heal the land and Africa -- give the best land of Africa back to the peasant and bring into the field and the village the fabulous biological and cultural diversity and wisdom of traditional farming.

Africa's cash cropping road to development

The idea of progress and Western development theory are twin sisters that emerged out of the fateful 1492 encounter between Europe and the rest of the world. Progress and development came to describe primarily the class position in the international political system of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Of course, Europe, and Europe's successor states in North America, won the confrontation with the non-white societies of the Americas, Asia, and Africa which they colonized as a means of appropriating their tropical wealth.

However, since Europe abandoned the slave trade, slavery, and the colonies themselves, while at the same time was determined to maintain its hegemony over its former imperial territories, particularly to have an uninterrupted access to African resources, it educated Africa to maintain its colonial institutions for achieving "progress"

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and “development.” This gave birth, among other things, to an entire stream of economic development literature in order to legitimize the perpetuation of colonialism in Africa under the guise of development. Even the 1960s post-colonial Western-style farming exported to the former colonies of Europe and North America -- now conveniently known as “the Third World” -- leaves not much doubt that this form of industrial agriculture, also dubbed the “green revolution,” is cash cropping, the old-style colonial cash cropping dressed in the technical panoply and impressive discourse of modern science.

Thierry Brun, a French scientist with the Agronomy Mediterranean Institute in Montpellier, France, argues that it is not possible to separate cash cropping from colonialism: “One was the justification of the other.”² Forced African labor built the infrastructure of cash cropping in Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Mali -- with immense destructive cultural, social, and ecological consequences, including the establishment of monocropping farming (centuries before the green revolution) and the denigration of indigenous agricultural systems.

Because in West Africa it is Africans who own, for the most part, cash cropping, the prices they received for their commodities were kept low enough that the profits nearly always went to the Europeans who processed and traded the tropical crops for export to Europe. But even the small amounts of European money African peasants earned from selling their export crops did not last long or bring substantive benefits to them. European grocery stores all over West Africa, usually managed by Lebanese, imported into Africa Europe’s manufactured goods. The very slave traders of the eighteenth century funded these grocery outposts in West Africa in the nineteenth century (from Liverpool, Amsterdam, Nantes and Bordeaux). And colonial administrators used forced labor to support these grocery stores which eventually evolved into corporations. In fact the entire economic system of West Africa (banking, railways, agricultural research stations, roads) was designed to support and serve cash cropping.³ Development for Africa became cash cropping.

Export cash cropping in sub-Saharan Africa is the strongest legacy of European colonialism. The Europeans made the Africans pay taxes by forcing them to produce a few tropical crops out of which the Europeans made desserts and beverages. By forcing cash cropping on Africa, Europe did more than assure herself of exotic desserts, drinks, and valuable tropical commodities like rubber, cotton and timber. Cash cropping remade Africa on the image of Europe.

The production of crops for export -- cash cropping -- became the royal, hegemonic part of African agriculture and political life. Cash cropping made African agriculture pro-male, pro-city, pro-state, and pro-plantation -- the very antithesis of pre-colonial agriculture that was almost a model after nature, growing food for rural people in societies in which women did most of the farming and decided the price of

²Thierry A. Brun, “The Nutrition and Health Impact of Cash Cropping in West Africa: A Historical Perspective,” World Review of Nutrition and Dietetics, Vol. 65, 1991, p. 152.

³Ibid., pp. 152-156.

food.⁴

Sub-Saharan Africa is paying a terrible price for her cash-cropping road to development. Cash crops condemn Africa to impoverishment and hunger -- even periodic starvation. The very essence and culture of Africa, subsistence peasant agriculture, with its extraordinary variety of indigenous food crops, is ignored for cash cropping. Maxwell Owusu, an African scholar, says that “the terms of Africa’s incorporation into the global capitalist market since the colonial days have up till now [in 1993] condemned Africa to the production of agricultural export commodities of little or no immediate use in Africa, which promotes African underdevelopment, and which by its very nature also promotes hunger and starvation as subsistence output is neglected in favor of export production.”⁵

Time for Africa is running out

Neglecting subsistence farming for plantation cash cropping is also having ecocidal effects on huge swaths of the African continent. R.D. Mann, an English agricultural researcher with 30 years of experience in Africa, warned in 1990 that “Africa’s arid regions are edging towards catastrophe. An area of 635,000 square kilometers has already been over-run by desert in the past 50 years, and the semi-arid belt 300 to 1,100 kilometers wide stretching across the continent is becoming sterile. Time for Africa is running out fast; as soil is eroded and the micro-climate continues to disintegrate across the whole continent, field-crop and livestock-production is decreasing yet further, and widespread hunger is increasing in frequency.”⁶

Mann argues that “unsustainable modern agricultural practices” are clearly a significant factor in the ecological destruction of Africa. This is particularly true of cash cropping. “In the Sahel and sub-Sahel,” he says, “the connection between the expansion of the area devoted to the cultivation of annual export crops and the desertification process is obvious. Whole rural communities have been [and] are still advised to clear woodland at the expense of ecological stability, leaving behind a trail of exhausted land.”⁷

Despite the trails of exhausted land and devastated rural communities all over Africa, international agencies like the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) lament the failure of the colonial model of plantation agriculture in Africa which, in reality, has mutated into American-style industrial farming, but, for political reasons, goes under the name of the “green revolution.”

FAO would like to see more of Africa’s land come under irrigation, more intensified chemical and mechanical farming replacing the gentle practices of the peasant.

⁴Maxwell Owusu, “Agriculture and Rural Development Since 1935” in UNESCO General History of Africa, Vol. VIII: Africa Since 1935, edited by Ali A. Mazrui (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁵Ibid., p. 350.

⁶R.D. Mann, “Time Running Out,” The Ecologist, March/April 1990, p. 53.

⁷Ibid., p. 49.

FAO does not give rainfed agriculture much of a chance to feed Africa, thus “neglect of irrigation may seem to be unthinkable.”⁸ Besides, FAO says that unsustainable farming follows rainfed agriculture. One wonders what African peasants did before the white invaders of their land hooked up their cash crop plantations with water from rivers or pulled water from the depths of the ground. FAO blames “soil mining” and “destruction of biodiversity” on those farming without irrigated water. This is a preposterous claim. And one may reasonably say that centuries of colonialism left nothing unchanged -- not even the peasant. But the blame for ecocide is primarily on the side of the plantation producing cash crops for export rather than peasant subsistence farming.

Consider Bangladesh, for instance. Sultan Ahmed Shah, a Bangladeshi researcher, wrote a report in 1994 about the “Environmental Impact of Irrigation Agriculture” in Bangladesh. His study is telling of the “profound environmental damaging effects” of the American-style agriculture in the world’s most densely populated country of more than 110 million people. Shah says that pesticides -- the greatest pillar of the industrial model of agricultural development imported from the United States and practiced in Bangladesh -- are having a “visible and profound ecological damage to numerous aquatic and terrestrial species.” In other words, pesticides are killing the wildlife of Bangladesh. He also argues that overuse of synthetic fertilizers for several years is having deleterious effects on the land. He says that the soils of Bangladesh “are hungry, sick and almost lifeless.”

This is not to suggest that irrigated sub-Saharan African agriculture will duplicate the deadly ecological effects of industrial agricultural practices in Bangladesh. But even unintended consequences are often part and parcel of certain technologies and models of development.

Social costs of conventional agriculture

The model of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization for the development of Africa is US agriculture. Yet this American farming system (which is the icon of the world’s industrial agriculture) has become a giant mechanical factory that, for about a century, has been mining and cannibalizing its way through rural America -- leaving behind desolate land, communities falling apart, and fearful people.

In the midst of the depression and dust bowl -- a massive ecological and social disaster that destroyed the land and lives of millions of Americans primarily because of very aggressive and violent farming practices -- the Secretary of Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, said that while the Indian “did little to change the virgin character of the land,” the white man “came with ax and plow and livestock. Advancing rapidly, farmers, lumbermen, and stockmen pushed the frontier farther and farther westward, cleared the land of forests, turned the prairie sod, and overstocked the range. They bared millions of acres to the wash and sweep of rain and wind, and soils which had been thoroughly

⁸United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, “Water Development and Food Security” (Rome, 1996), p. 13.

protected for thousands of years began to erode.”⁹

But in the case of African American family farmers, descendants of slaves exported from Africa to man the Europeans’ cash crop plantations in America, the erosion of the land, the wash and sweep of rain and wind, was also the erosion of their very survival, the violent racism that followed their emancipation washed and swept them from the land. America’s giant agriculture worked them nearly to death for 400 years, inevitably, bringing their entire black experience in farming, their exquisite knowledge of rice cultivation,¹⁰ fragile ownership of land, and rural culture on the borders of extinction.

“African Americans,” says Gary Grant, President of the Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association, “have been losing land at extraordinary rates, averaging 9,000 acres per week. Discrimination within and by the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] is at the root of the Black farmers’ struggle to save his land, his livelihood, his health and his family. In 1920, 1 in 7 farmers in America was Black, but by 1982 only 1 in 67 farmers was Black. The most recent figures show that since 1982 alone, the number of Black operated farms in the U.S. has decreased over 43 %....Black farmers do not suffer from some temporary aberration for justice and fairness. Instead we and our families are subjected to a persistent and degrading suppression of our living standards, our mental and physical health, and of our dignity and humanity.”¹¹

Gary Grant is right. The combination of racism and the plantation technologies of power of giant agriculture make for a determined adversary. Bill Mollison, the Australian who founded **permaculture** (permanent agriculture and culture) in the late 1970s, a means of raising food based on Third World traditional peasant farming knowledge and wisdom, described this new rural adversary with precision. “Most things in agriculture,” he says, “today [in 1992] are really death systems...Agriculture today grows nonsensical crops for nonsensical reasons. It grows practically all of its soybean to feed animals; fish are caught to be turned into powder and fed to pigs...Beef agriculture has destroyed the world’s drylands...And the world’s largest agriculture is the European and American grass lawn...Agriculture lost its way in the 1940s. Once it was there to produce food for people; now it’s there to produce money for large interests. With present day agriculture, the Third World is made to feed the First World, the reverse of aid in its true sense.”¹²

In the United States, farmers or growers -- at least the tiny minority of white businessmen that have the largest stake in the perpetual financial prosperity of the giant agricultural system -- **produce** “plant or animal products” under rigid chemical and

⁹US Department of Agriculture, Yearbook of Agriculture 1936 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1936), p. 60.

¹⁰Joseph A. Opala, The Gullah: Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-American Connection (Freetown, Sierra Leone: USIS, 1987).

¹¹Gary R. Grant, “Black Farmers not Taking Anything for Granted,” Press Release, Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association, Washington, DC., January 31, 1998.

¹²Bill Mollison, “A Design Science with an Ethic,” Ceres, November-December 1992, pp.24-25.

monocultural regimes. They probably never heard of permaculture or Bill Mollison or sustainable agriculture or that black farmers in the United States are disappearing. And they would be shocked to hear they work for something made up mostly of “death systems.” Yet Bill Mollison characterized the situation correctly: There’s practically nothing in the conventional agriculture of America that is in accord with human needs, democratic institutions, social justice, respect and love of nature, and respect for science. Giant agriculture is using and misusing science to justify the huge public subsidies it extracts from a corrupt political culture -- including a corrupt and cowardly academic class of “scientists” who keep silent on the face of daily ecocide and social disintegration and fear in the countryside. Why not say, for example, that pushing black farmers out of farming is bad for America? Or that what passes for “modern” and “advanced” and “high-tech” in agriculture (like sowing entire plantations with only one crop) is against human culture, nature, and science? That, in fact, such a practice is nothing but the expression of the violence and greed of colonialism and cash cropping?

Matthias Igbozurike, an African scientist educated in the United States, studied giant agriculture’s obsession with one-crop farming (monoculture) and concluded that such an industrial agricultural monoculture is a catastrophe because it is “inimical to the natural order, deleterious to ecospheric safety, and lethal to man’s long-term interests.”¹³ One also has to visit an animal factory to be convinced that giant agriculture does not care about nature, culture, or our society’s long-term interests. The smell and stink of death hang around animal factories like a plague. These killing operations are made to print money for corporations through the administration of enormous inhumanity, cruelty, suffering, and outright violence against hundreds and thousands of caged animals spending their short lives under conditions of mechanical barbarism. No civilization here. Pure slaughterhouse.

The social effects of giant agriculture have equally been catastrophic to the welfare and political and cultural life of most farm communities -- and farmers: Wherever big agriculture settles in rural America, it is almost certain it will rapidly destroy the democratic, cultural, and economic institutions of the community and convert everything around it to a plantation. A Kentucky farmer and poet, Wendel Berry, wrote a book in 1977 whose title, The Unsettling of America, captures some of the despair and diminishing opportunities that came to the countryside with the spread of factory farming throughout the land.

In 1992 we hear that “Abandoned farmsteads and closed businesses haunt rural Kansas.”¹⁴ Marty Strange, an agricultural policy analyst from Nebraska’s Center for Rural Affairs, says that a fundamental demographic shift is taking place in the farm communities of America: Farmers are getting few and old, fast. “In Nebraska,” he says, “the number of farms shrunk 12 percent between 1978 and 1987. The number of farmers age 45 and 54 were hardest hit, shrinking 38 percent. But the number of active farmers

¹³Matthias U. Igbozurike, “Against Monoculture,” The Professional Geographer, April 1971, pp. 113-117.

¹⁴Jerry Jost, “Looking to the Future,” Sustainable Farming News, February 1992 (Kansas Rural Center, Whiting, Kansas).

over age 65 actually increased 16 percent. Those older farmers now farm one-fifth of the farmland in the state, 43 percent more than they farmed in 1978.” Strange sees nothing good from this unsettling of the land. He says that “wholesales of fertilizer increased during the period, but sales of groceries, shoes, haircuts and everything else that has to do with people fell. This has left rural main street with little more than dealers, brokers, franchisers and agents -- businesses designed to siphon money of the community.”¹⁵

Ecological costs of conventional farming

The ecological consequences of giant agriculture (also known as conventional farming, agribusiness, green revolution, and industrial and factory agriculture) are equally severe and dramatic. Giant agriculture is an industrial system that has very little to do with traditional farming. It relies on “producing” one crop at a time in expanses of the land, plantations, huge spreads, feeding that one crop with synthetic fertilizers, and protecting it from insects and diseases with powerful toxins. Giant agriculture is also concentrated livestock operations, and food processing and marketing of food. Chemical-intensive and toxic means of pest control do kill anything (insects, pathogens, plants, and animals) in competition with the plant or animal of the farmer. But the primary importance of those agricultural biocides is political: They make it possible for giant agriculture to stay giant.

In 1987 both the US Department of Agriculture and the National Academy of Sciences concluded that chemical pesticides “are responsible for a wide array of unacceptable negative effects on the environment.”¹⁶ They are right -- but few people listen: America’s fertile land is being poisoned to force the maximum production of a few cash crops.

One of the many nasty consequences of such a dangerous practice and policy is more and more terata, yes, human terata, babies with severe birth defects, are born to farmers and to those who live near farmers. For example, researchers from the University of Minnesota and the US Environmental Protection Agency report that the deleterious human effects of agribusiness are pronounced in the spring wheat, potato, and sugar beet regions of western Minnesota whose farmers use extensive amounts of chlorophenoxy defoliant herbicides like 2,4-D and MCPA and fungicides. These scientists documented life-threatening birth defects in rural Minnesota among children born in the spring to pesticide applicators, farmers, and others who reside next to farmers.¹⁷ The National Academy of Sciences also concluded in 1989 that conventional farming in many states is “the leading nonpoint source of water pollution.”¹⁸

¹⁵Marty Strange, “An Open Letter to the Sustainable Agriculture Movement,” Center for Rural Affairs Newsletter, December 1990 (Walthill, Nebraska).

¹⁶National Academy of Sciences, Board on Basic Biology, Commission on Life Sciences, Research Briefing 1987: Report of the Research Panel on Biological Control in Managed Ecosystems (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1987).

¹⁷Vincent F. Garry et al., “Pesticide Applicators, Biocides, and Birth Defects in Rural Minnesota,” Environmental Health Perspectives, April 1996, pp. 394-399.

¹⁸National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council, Alternative Agriculture

Since 1945 conventional or green revolution-style of agriculture has degraded an area of more than 2.4 billion acres of land -- the equivalent of a region covering India and China together.¹⁹ Nearly half of that wrecked land, some of it moderately eroded, some of it severely degraded, is in Africa.²⁰ Yet economic analysis obscures the degradation and, sometimes, destruction of the natural resources in the absence of which no agriculture is possible.

Moreover, the persistent policies of conventional agriculture of using only a handful of crops to “produce” most of the world’s food -- in largely huge farms displacing the tiny but immensely rich in biological and cultural diversity peasant farms - - are responsible for the tragic loss of a considerable amount of genetic resources for food and agriculture. The 20th century alone witnessed the loss of some 75 percent of the varieties of food crops. In the tropics, says Hugh Iltis, the world-renown botanist at the University of Wisconsin, cash crop agriculture causes biological genocide and utter devastation.²¹ The situation is so bad in the impoverishment of both cultural and biological diversity that determine what people have been worshipping, growing, and eating for millennia that one can describe the loss of agricultural biodiversity and the erosion of cultural diversity as a biological and cultural meltdown.²²

Decolonizing plantation Africa

Growing luxury crops like tea, cocoa, coffee and sugar for export in sub-Saharan Africa is a legacy of European colonialism that, in the late 1990s, translates into hunger for more than 200 million people and biological and cultural meltdown for the entire region.

The Europeans forced the Africans to pay taxes by forcing them to produce a few crops out of which the Europeans made desserts and beverages. In fact this process of extracting desirable commodities from the tropics was so massive and violent that , for 300 years, millions of Africans were sent to the Americas as slaves to work sugarcane, cotton, and coffee in huge plantations. J.H. Bernardin de Saint Pierre, a French royal officer, said in 1769, he was not so sure that coffee and sugar were “really essential to the comfort of Europe,” but he was certain that these two crops “have brought wretchedness and misery upon America and Africa. The former is depopulated, that Europeans may have a land to plant them in, and the latter is stripped of its inhabitants, for hands to

(Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1989), p.7.

¹⁹World Resources Institute, World Resources 1992-93: A Guide to the Global Environment (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 3.

²⁰United Nations Environment Programme, Global Environment Outlook (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 26.

²¹Hugh Iltis, “Extinction is Forever,” Resurgence, November / December 1997, pp. 18-22.

²²Hope Shand, Human Nature: Agricultural Biodiversity and Farm-Based Food Security (Ottawa, Canada: Rural Advancement Foundation International, December 1997), pp. 1-9. This report was prepared for the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

cultivate them.”²³

Africa is still unhappy from her European encounter -- a largely muted displeasure, bitterness, coloring all relations of most Africans with each other and their former colonial masters. After all, Africans are producing, more or less, the cash crops they used to produce under French, British, Portuguese, Belgian, Italian and German colonialism -- cocoa, coffee, sugar, peanuts, cotton, rubber, tea, palm oil, timber, and tobacco. The violence of the old system has not diminished or vanished. It has, instead, gone underground, reappearing in the hunger, destruction of nature, and other forms of invisible yet deleterious manifestations of ecological and social disintegration. The signs are all over Africa -- and beyond:

(1) Cash crops for export take more and more of the best land from local food production, forcing peasants to bring additional marginal land under cultivation. The social and environmental results of such policies are devastating.²⁴

(2) Women are crucial for food production in Africa. But when men out-migrate for jobs, the entire burden of subsistence farming falls on women who frequently have no land tenure rights. Female labor is also important for the production of men's cash crops. These social arrangements often result in hungry and malnourished women, food insecurity, bad gender relations, and bad development policies. Women are also responsible for growing and processing of cassava, the most important subsistence food in sub-Saharan Africa.²⁵

(3) Paul Richards, the British geography professor with extensive agricultural research and teaching experience in Africa, argues convincingly that the dramatic modernization option of industrializing agriculture in Africa has been such a failure that time has come for something fundamentally different -- like designing a support system for peasant farming which he credits with strong innovations in food production. He calls his pro-peasant strategy “the people's science option.” He says: “a peasant-focused, decentralized approach to research and development in West African agriculture is an option worth serious consideration because it is appropriate to the region's environmental circumstances. People's science is worth pursuing in West Africa not out of spontaneous admiration for the peasantry (though on my part I am quite ready to admit such admiration) but on the grounds that it is good science.”²⁶

²³J.H. Bernardin de Saint Pierre, A Voyage to the Isle of France, the Isle of Bourbon, and the Cape of Good Hope; with Observations and Reflections Upon Nature and Mankind (London: J. Cundee, 1800), pp. 119-120.

²⁴Allen Isaacman and Richard Roberts, eds., Cotton, Colonialism, and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa (London: James Currey, 1995).

²⁵Cleophas Lado, “Female Labor Participation in Agricultural Production and the Implications for Nutrition and Health in Rural Africa,” Social Science and Medicine, Vol. 34, No. 7, 1992, pp. 789-807.

²⁶Paul Richards, Indigenous Agricultural Revolution: Ecology and Food Production in West Africa (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), p. 162.

Another British scientist, Laurence Roche, exactly like Paul Richards, says that time is of the essence in siding with the African peasant: The social and ecological emergency of Africa demands that selfish schemes be abandoned. Roche spent fifteen years of work and travel in Africa and became furious with the waste and destruction of the imported economic growth model of development fueling the ambitions of African leaders. But he said the needs and culture of the peasant ought to be the sole priority of those who care about Africa, discarding, at the same time, the fixation of the elites with capital-intensive projects that usually benefit a few Africans living in the city and industrialists in Europe and North America.²⁷

Has the people's science option, the evidence from scientific research that the peasant in fact is Africa, that traditional farming is the most credible and appropriate method of raising food in Africa, any better chance in the beginning of the 21st century? An American researcher, Bill Rau, confirmed in 1993 the admiration of Paul Richards, Laurence Roche, and other students of Africa for African peasants. He said that "African agricultural knowledge offers the strongest hope for igniting and promoting sustained development throughout the continent."²⁸ Incidentally, I have advanced the same thesis for Third World peasants in general in both of my books, Fear in the Countryside (1976) and Harvest of Devastation (1994): Peasants and their traditional knowledge do matter.

(4) Yet, in Africa, colonialism is even threatening not merely how much people eat but what they eat. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization reports that, increasingly, Africans eat mostly imported wheat, corn, and rice. About half of the African people eat roots, tubers and plantains for something like 40 percent of their diet.²⁹

Why Africans eat less and less of their own food goes to the very heart of their hunger and dependency on others. Colonialism forced them to produce export cash crops and to eat imported grains. The Europeans heaped scorn on the fantastic variety of Africa's indigenous cereals. And the Western scientists classified the African grains as cattle feed. That is why -- and not so much because of urbanization, perishability of food or labor requirements -- many of the 2,000 varieties of indigenous grains, roots, fruits and other food plants have been "lost," at least from the daily diet of most Africans.

But these foods still exist in Africa and they are the answer to the tremendous food insecurity of so many millions of human beings in both Africa and elsewhere in the world. In a 1996 study, Lost Crops of Africa, the US National Academy of Sciences says that Africa's native cereals like rice, finger millet, fonio, pearl millet, sorghum, tef, guinea millet, and dozens of wild cereals, present a "local legacy of genetic wealth upon which a sound food future might be built."³⁰

²⁷Laurence Roche, "Forestry and Famine: Arguments Against Growth Without Development," The Ecologist, Jan / Feb 1989, pp. 16-21.

²⁸Bill Rau, From Feast to Famine: Official Cures and Grassroots Remedies to Africa's Food Crisis (London: Zed Books, 1993), p. 147.

²⁹United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, "Food, Agriculture and Food Security" (Rome, 1996), p. 11.

³⁰National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council, Lost Crops of Africa

Resurrecting Africa's own food plants -- in other words, getting back to peasant agriculture by putting sustainable human development to practice in Africa -- would heal the ecological wounds of the Sahel. Africa's cereals are tolerant of heat, cold, drought, waterlogging, and infertile land. And they are also nutritious and tasty. The Academy of Sciences study says that Africa's "lost" plants may benefit more than Africa because "they represent an exceptional cluster of cereal biodiversity with particular promise for solving some of the food production problems that will arise in the twenty-first century."³¹

The "lost crops" of Africa present Africa, the rest of the world, and the international development community with a great opportunity to give substance to some of the theory one hears at United Nations fora on "sustainable human development" -- and join the African peasants, who still use many of these indigenous food plants, in building Africa's food security around Africa's own food, people, and culture.

This means, above all, the dismantling of the colonial cash cropping culture -- and the distribution of that cash crop land to the peasants. Clearly, coffee and sugar made Africa very unhappy. The French observer of the mature but beastly colonial system, Bernardin de Saint Pierre, was right in 1769: Europe, and the Europeans in America, tore Africa to pieces for their pleasure. In the Congo, for instance, Belgian and French soldiers and agents of cash cropping companies carried "fire and sword from one end of the country to the other" in order to force the Africans to work rubber.³² And an African observer of the evolving but still evil colonial system, Chinua Achebe, captured in 1959 the anguish of Africa when he said "all our gods are weeping" with the imposition on Africans by the white colonizers of a "lunatic religion" -- Christianity -- that disrupted the peasants' sacred farming with cash cropping and forced them to abandon their ancestral gods.³³

Certainly it would not be easy for Africa to return to her pre-colonial (pre-Islamic, pre-Christian) culture. The entire international system, including Islam and Christianity, would oppose that kind of metamorphosis for Africa primarily because both the international system and the foreign religions benefit from Africa's impoverishment and political weakness.

The global political arrangements on the dawn of the 21st century -- that confront the massive hunger of Africa with icy indifference -- may center around the moral idea of the United Nations but, nevertheless, they are a sophisticated if mutant high-tech version of slave-days state balance of power without formal slavery. They are long-winded on issues which, on their own right, are terribly important, but which become abstractions at the hands of their public relations men and women. Issues like sustainable development,

(Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1996), p. 1.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 15.

³²E.D. Morel, The Black Man's Burden (first published in 1920, reprint, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), pp. 128-132.

³³Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1959), pp. 142-186.

gender, indigenous knowledge, human rights, biological and cultural diversity, environment are drained of meaning and political significance. It's as if they are saying to the world "We are not about to do anything to end hunger, poverty, biological and cultural meltdown, environmental destruction, racism, inequality, but we are doing a lot to define those problems." No bread, no clean water, no biodiversity, but plenty of words.

And, unfortunately, that downpour of coded vocabulary sprinkled with plenty of acronyms, and, from time to time, the flash and excitement of international conferences, suffice to keep, for the most part, the civil society's "best and brightest" busy fighting for the good cause but hopelessly frozen in place by the global political system. In all this protracted world dramatic theatrical exercise, the protagonists are very careful with anything that touches the interests of those few who hold power -- like multinational corporations and the 358 billionaires who, in 1996, owned more money and wealth than 2.5 billion human beings or 45 percent of the world population.³⁴

Clearly, then, in the presence of these barbarian realities in the global organization of power, even scrapping sub-Saharan Africa's plantation agriculture alone would cause alarm (and even violence) in Europe, North America, and Africa (and probably panic in the international system's powerful agencies like the World Bank and the World Trade Organization). Yet cash cropping for the benefit of a few Africans and foreigners ought to find no more room in Africa. Only then the gods of Africa would cease weeping -- and the lengthy process of reconstruction might have a chance to heal the enormous wounds of foreign domination and ruthless colonialism.

Besides, self-sufficiency in all matters of importance, and food self-sufficiency in particular, is a good idea. Aristotle called that **autarkeia**, autarchy, self-rule, and thought it should be both the end and the best of state policy.³⁵ And Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the eighteenth-century French philosopher who probably read Aristotle, also appreciated self-sufficiency, especially in food and agriculture because, he believed, only enough food raised at home could guarantee the independence of a state. "Commerce," he said, "produces wealth, but agriculture ensures freedom."³⁶

In Africa, agriculture will nurture freedom when all land from the cash crop plantations passes on to the peasants who are certain to grow both food and democracy, the two most fundamental ingredients for the resurrection of that ancient continent. In addition, giving land to the African peasants is certain to inspire their distant relatives in the United States, the threatened black family farmers, to keep fighting for their land and freedom.

³⁴Barbara Crossette, "U.N. Survey Finds World Rich-Poor Gap Widening," New York Times, July 15, 1996, p. A3.

³⁵Aristotle, Politics I ii, 1252b27-1253a.

³⁶Quoted in Revolution: European Radicals from Hus to Lenin, edited by Charles H. George (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foreman, 1971), p.134.

