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**Sowing Africa with African seeds**

By E.G. Vallianatos

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 because “One was the justification of the other.”

In West Africa it is Africans who have owed, for the most part, cash cropping. Yet 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.

Slave traders from Liverpool, Amsterdam, Nantes and Bordeaux funded these grocery outposts in West Africa, while colonial administrators used forced labor for their support. These grocery stores 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.

Development for Africa became cash cropping.

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 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.” He was certain, however, 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 cultivate them.”

Africa is still unhappy from her European and American encounter -- a largely muted displeasure, coloring all relations of most Africans with each other and their former colonial masters. After all, in 2007, Africans are producing, more or less, the cash crops they used to produce under colonialism -- cocoa, coffee, sugar, peanuts, cotton, rubber, tea, palm oil, timber, and tobacco. The violence of the old system has not vanished:

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.

Thousands of children in Niger are dying of hunger. Nigeria, Mali and Burkina Faso are also facing hunger. Mali children are enslaved to work cocoa at Ivory Coast, which produces 70 percent of the world's supply of cocoa beans. Global food and chocolate companies benefit from the trafficking, torture and slavery of African children.

Women are crucial for food production in Africa. When men out-migrate for jobs, the burden of subsistence farming falls on women who frequently have no land tenure rights. Women are also important for the production of men's cash crops, with the result, they are often hungry and malnourished.

Africa needs assistance to abandon cash cropping for food cropping. Her peasants are capable of feeding the continent. The preferential option for the peasants is based on good science and Africa's legacy of food riches:

Paul Richards, the British geography professor with extensive agricultural research and teaching experience in Africa, argues convincingly that industrialized agriculture in Africa has failed and time has come for something fundamentally different -- like supporting peasant farming, which he credits with strong innovations in food production. He calls his pro-peasant strategy "the people's science option."

The US National Academy of Sciences agrees. In its 1996 study, "The Lost Crops of Africa," the Academy concluded that Africa has all it takes to use her agricultural "genetic wealth" to feed herself. This food wealth, now dispersed and "lost," is made up by hundreds of varieties of crop seeds like rice, fonio, tef, sorghum, and finger and pearl millets.

Why doesn't the G-8 industrial countries, including rich foundations like that of Gates, join Sub-Saharan Africa, bringing back into farming Africa's fabulous seeds, which are nutritious and require no external inputs? Such an investment would eliminate hunger, boosting African food sovereignty and freedom.

Use the billions of Gates and other philanthropists to purchase some or all of the land of cash crops; give that land to the peasants, helping them to duplicate and sow the ancient seeds on that land.

Diminishing cash crops in Africa may cause some inconvenience but not a discomfort in Europe and America.

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