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Calling for food sovereignty for Africa
Planting 'lost crops' would reduce hunger, violence
BY E.G. VALLIANATOS

Growing luxury crops like tea, cocoa and coffee for export in sub-Saharan Africa is probably the strongest legacy of European colonialism -- a legacy that translates into hunger and violence for Africa.

Africans don't need coffee, tea, and cocoa. They grow them entirely for the gastronomic pleasures of Europe and North America. But Africans need more food. Gambians, for example, produce peanuts, which they export for money to import food. They are not the exception.

The cash-cropping road to development is behind most of the violence in Africa. It provides the theory and practice of plunder. It condemns Africa to impoverishment and hunger -- even pushing Africa's extraordinary variety of indigenous food crops to the verge of extinction. Africans, who are eating less of their own food, now eat more imported wheat, rice and corn. Why Africans eat less and less of their own food goes to the very heart of their hunger and dependency on others. Europeans heaped scorn on many of Africa's cereals. And Western scientists classified many African grains as cattle feed. That is why many of the more than 2,000 varieties of indigenous grains, roots, and 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 people there and elsewhere in the world. In a 1996 study titled "The Lost Crops of Africa," the U.S. National Academy of Sciences said 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."

Bringing back to life Africa's food plants would heal the ecological wounds of the continent. Africa's cereals are tolerant of heat, cold, drought, and waterlogging and infertile land. A dose of agrarian reform could help heal some of the continent's political wounds. In addition, the study said 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."

The lost crops present the international development community with a great opportunity to practice applied sustainable development. This means Europe and North America have to end their "plantation project" in Africa. Instead of dumping their obsolete pesticides and genetically engineered seeds to desperate Africans, Europe and North America ought to move aggressively to bring back to life the very crops they have been encouraging Africans to forget.

More food from Africa's own crops for Africa's own people will be the best medicine and solution to local hunger. An Africa without hunger would be best prepared to put her tottering house in order – end her civil wars, promote democracy, international trade, and sustainable development.

Xenophon, the Greek general, historian, and student of Socrates, said that agriculture was the mother of sciences and freedom. And Aristotle insisted that food sovereignty was one of the state's main responsibilities. Only when Africa's lost crops are no longer lost but the very substance of African agriculture will Africa be ready to face the world.

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