

Moseley, William G.; Gray, Leslie C. (Hrsg.): *Hanging by a Thread. Cotton, Globalization, and Poverty in Africa*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press 2008. ISBN: 978-91-7106-614-5; 296 S.

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Current developments in Sub-Saharan Africa's cotton sectors are definitely worthy of book-length treatment, for a number of reasons. Historically, cotton production on the continent had a uniquely intimate relation with colonialism.¹ For half a century more households on the continent have been dependent upon incomes from cotton than from any other export crop. Popular institutions have always flourished around the sector, often playing a critical role in national politics. And, of export crops, cotton has almost certainly been more subject to political intervention than any other.

On the other hand, there are fundamental differences in the economic weight of national cotton systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, and in their organizational characteristics. Cotton enjoys an economic importance in Francophone West and Central Africa (FWCA) far exceeding that in Anglophone Africa. Not coincidentally, cotton market privatization in FWCA has been more closely managed and less far-reaching in nature than in Anglophone Africa – at least until very recently.

Moseley and Gray's collection appears to have been prepared during 2003-04, at the height of the WTO cotton dispute. This dispute followed a large increase in US cotton subsidies in 2002, in breach of the WTO Uruguay Round agreement. It occurred in a context of historically low international prices – thus rendering uncompetitive the exports of a range of countries including those in WCA. Brazil opened a formal WTO dispute with the US, while five WCA countries launched a separate 'Cotton Initiative' calling for a global phasing out of subsidies and for transitional financial compensation for the Least Developed Country that produced cotton. At this time, it seemed that African cotton systems were indeed 'hanging by a thread', basically as a result of US farm politics and the global dynamics of overproduction.

Moseley and Gray's Introduction and Conclusion to this volume seek to justify and frame it mainly in terms of its salience to the issues raised by the cotton dispute. In reality though, despite repeated references to the US and to WTO, the contributions lack a common focus – either with reference to the evolving dynamic between the global economy, its regulation and African cotton systems, or to the specific nature of national cotton systems on the continent. This is despite the fact that, unusually for an English-language text, a majority of the papers featured describe developments in FWCA countries, where these unique features are most evident. The lack of focus partly reflects the disciplinary diversity of the contributors, who range from geographers through economists to anthropologists and environmental scientists, as well as the decision of the editors to include amongst the ten papers three dealing not with mainstream cotton systems but with what they call 'alternate futures', namely GM (Bt) and organic cotton.

One of these three papers (by Grouse, Shankar and Thirtle) describes the impact of a now defunct Bt cotton contract farming scheme for black smallholders in Kwa Zulu Natal. The scheme generated revenue benefits for farmers but collapsed due to the contracting company's inability to recover the credit it had advanced to farmers. That is, the nature of the crop was immaterial to the scheme's success or failure. The other two papers are speculative accounts of the likely economic and environmental impacts of dissemination of Bt (Bingen) and organic (Dowd) cotton under different institutional scenarios, although Bingen's also contains an interesting description of the role of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and others in promoting the Bt cotton agenda in Africa.

There are six papers on cotton in FWCA countries. The seventh remaining paper is a slightly updated version of Poulton et al's survey of cotton sector liberalization processes and their outcomes in four Anglophone Afri-

¹ Allen Isaacman, Richard Roberts (Hrsg.), *Cotton, Colonialism and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa*. London 1993

can countries plus Mozambique.² The present reviewer was a co-author of the original published version of this paper and will therefore not comment on it.

Thematically and methodologically the six FWCA papers cover the structure of the commodity chain for cotton, and to a lesser extent price issues across the FWCA generally, anno 2003-05 (Bassett); concerns of local cotton farmers, based on a qualitative survey in Burkina Faso (Gray); the relation between cotton production and environmental degradation, based on a longitudinal quantitative survey in Mali (Moseley); the relation between cotton production and social inequality in Benin, based on econometric analysis of survey data (Siaens and Wodon); the wider community-level benefits and drawbacks of cotton production, based on a qualitative survey in Mali (Koenig); and the reorganization of Village Associations/cotton cooperatives, also based on a qualitative survey in Mali (Lacy). The surveys reported by Gray and Lacy are relatively recent but those reported by Moseley, Siaens and Wodon and Koenig are all from the 1990s.

Most of these papers generate some new insights about cotton systems in FWCA. Evidence is presented that – despite the book’s sub-title – cotton production in the region was generally associated with improvements in economic well-being in the 1990s (Siaens and Wodon) and that it has not been driving inequality (Moseley, Siaens and Wodon). However, production in many areas appeared to have reached its limits (Moseley). This reflected different types of difficulties in sustaining two fundamental historical characteristics of FWCA cotton systems – price stabilization and high levels of input provision. Most attention is given to problems relating to sustaining the second of these characteristics. These include environmental ones (Moseley) as well as that of high levels of farmer indebtedness – or, put another way – severe problems in recovering credit (Koenig, Lacy). These problems have given rise to village-level institutional reforms whose implications for indebted farmers are also explored (Koenig, Lacy).

What is missing from these accounts, and from the book as a whole – making it a rather frustrating read – is the big historical picture

of the rise and fall of FWCA cotton production. This is not a question of the implications of the WTO cotton dispute (or even the global overproduction of the period it coincided with) for individual countries in FWCA and their cotton farmers. Rather it is one of the sustainability of an immensely ambitious neo-colonial project to drive social and economic ‘development’ across a huge region by creating what Roy calls a ‘state within a state’, underwritten by a huge European public enterprise (CFDT, later Dagrís).³ Signs of this project’s morbidity are noted in many of the contributions, but its overall health is not directly questioned. Today (2010) however, despite a return to global undersupply and international prices at a 30+ year high, Dagrís has been privatized at a knock-down price and cotton production in FWCA stands at just over half of its 2006 level. It is this epic story that really deserves telling. Hopefully, one day it will be.

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² Colin Poulton et al., Competition and coordination in African cotton marketing systems, in: *World Development* 31 (2004) 3, p. 519-536.

³ Alexis Roy, Peasant Struggles in Mali, in: *Review of African Political Economy* 125 (2010) p. 299-314.