

Peasant Cotton Revolution in West Africa: Cote d'Ivoire, 1880–1995. *By Thomas J. Bassett.*
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 266 pp. Tables, graphs, maps. Cloth, \$64.95.
ISBN 0-521-78313-5.

Reviewed by Robert L. Tignor

There is a little of something for everyone in Thomas Bassett's fascinating account of cotton cultivation in the Ivory Coast from the late nineteenth century to the present. Historians will value his culling of the colonial archives to tell a story of African peasant production that differs in some significant ways from the better-known narrative of Gold Coast and Nigerian cocoa farmers in this same period. Development economists will profit from Bassett's discussion of the Ivory Coast's having produced a true agricultural revolution in the 1970s and 1980s. And anthropologists and rational choice political economists will take pleasure in Bassett's treatment of the African peasant cultivator responding in ingenious, yet also predictable, ways to the messages of markets and prices.

Let us start with the history. Perhaps, one should not be surprised to note that Bassett, a geographer, not a historian, has used, with great skill and sensitivity, French colonial archives located in the Ivory Coast, Senegal, and France. These enable him to describe the struggle for territorial mastery among three rivals—the invading French forces who eventually brought the northern portion of the Ivory Coast into the French empire, the famous African warrior leader and protagonist of the French, Samori Toure, and a less well-known but no less significant African war leader, Tieba. Bassett anchors his discussion of the precolonial and colonial history of cotton cultivation within this political framework. In the same chapter in which he catalogues the military and political battles of the late nineteenth century, he also discusses the types of cotton being grown in the late-nineteenth-century Ivory Coast. These types stemmed from four strains, several of which had their origins in Africa for millennia and several of which were imported later from the Americas.

The discussion of cotton strains previews one of the main themes of the book. Cotton growing did not arrive with the colonial rulers. It preceded the colonial era, providing a vital raw material for a local textile industry and was a critical product for people's clothing. Indeed, in the colonial era, except when the state brought heavy pressure to bear on local cultivators, the Ivory Coast cotton farmers preferred to sell to local artisans than to become exporters to French textile

manufacturers. The prices that French manufacturers were willing or able to pay were not attractive enough to draw cotton away from their West African competitors.

Thus, the colonial period in the Ivory Coast was not, as it was elsewhere in parts of colonial West Africa, a period of heavy involvement in international commerce. All this changed after colonial rule ended, however. Not only did French textile manufacturers meet a rising need for raw cotton by offering more remunerative prices, but the cotton cultivators in the Ivory Coast and elsewhere in West Africa responded vigorously to this enhanced economic environment. Indeed, between 1960 and 1990, the Ivory Coast witnessed what the author regards as an agricultural revolution. For Bassett, an agricultural revolution entails more than increased agricultural productivity, or even increased agricultural productivity per person. To him it must lead to increased agricultural productivity per hectare. What made this agricultural revolution possible was not that the Ivory Coasters produced more cotton, as happened with agricultural producers in other parts of Africa. They also effected a dramatic revolution in productivity, using improved agricultural techniques, most notably the ox-plow, to achieve rising levels of production on a hectare of land. The complaint often made about African agriculture in the colonial and postcolonial period is that while output increased and yields per person even rose, these improvements occurred not because of improvements in technique. They were the result of new land being brought under cultivation and previously unused labor being mobilized, often within the family. In this instance, however, Ivory Coasters were agricultural innovators, undoubtedly not as spectacularly successful as their counterparts in other parts of the world, but able to produce significant results nonetheless.

In the second half of the book, Bassett alters his methodology, replacing archival sources with information drawn from interviews and surveys conducted in the Katiali community province of Korhogo in the northern Ivory Coast. Although the techniques are different and the purview of research narrower, the findings are no less insightful and the work no less careful and persuasive. Here, Bassett charts the agricultural achievements of a heartland area of cotton cultivation in the postwar decades, analyzing both the early economic successes and the economic downturn of the 1990s. By 1990, a glut in the world's supply of cotton had begun to depress prices. Ivory Coast cultivators reacted with remarkable speed and ingenuity to the shift in world prices. Male farmers used their patriarchal power to keep women from cultivating the crop. They also enhanced their bargaining position with buyers by setting up cooperatives and engaging in strikes. In Bassett's view, these actions, based as they were on highly rational economic and political decisions, reflected the rational actor and business orientation so common among these individuals over the whole of the period.

Bassett offers insights in many history, development economics, and rational choice theories. He challenges the stereotype of the unenterprising and irrational African cultivator. He demonstrates that innovation can come from African agents as well as from beyond. The findings may not convince everyone. Perhaps the author is guilty of offering a romanticized view of peasant farming. Yet many of Bassett's arguments have been in the historical literature on African cultivators for a long time. The fact that the author finds evidence of similar peasant behavior in the contemporary period should lead agricultural experts to reassess their approaches to village communities.

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