Rural livelihoods and agricultural commercialization in colonial Uganda: conjunctures of external influences and local realities

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Africa’s economic past is far from static, but rather characterised by spatially and temporally dispersed booms and busts. The colonial era “cash-crop revolution” is a prime case of an unsustained boom. This thesis examines how external influences and local realities shaped the nature, extent, and impact of cash crop production for international markets in colonial Uganda. In this landlocked country in central east Africa, production of cotton and, subsequently, coffee took off following completion of a railway to the coast. The role of colonial policies is central to much scholarship on this turn towards export agriculture. This thesis, instead, places the choices of African rural households—what to produce, when to migrate, and whom to educate—centre stage. The research draws from agricultural survey and census data, colonial correspondence, and statistical time series obtained from archival collections in the UK, Belgium, and Uganda, supplemented by digitised census records and interviews with elderly farmers in Eastern Uganda.

The thesis seeks to contribute to broader debates on African comparative development and colonial legacies. The case of Uganda is singled out for in depth analysis because some of the key characteristics of its development path appear inconsistent with various influential views of African development, thus providing scope to challenge, rather than simply reinforce, consensus perspectives. Firstly, Uganda’s cash crop revolution stands out for its reliance on cotton, a crop that was particularly sought after by European colonisers, but widely rejected by smallholders throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Secondly, in colonial Uganda, smallholder-based agriculture and indirect rule were combined with direct taxation and poor remuneration of wage labour. This mix of colonial institutions and economic structures complicates widely used categorizations, such as a dichotomy between “peasant” and “settlement” economies. Thirdly, Uganda became a prime destination for voluntary, non-recruited labour migrants. The fact that they were willing to work for low wages in a context of land-abundance and rural commercialization is add odds with the widely supported view that labour scarcity shaped labour market dynamics and institutions in early colonial Africa.

The thesis offers five independent but related “interventions” into debates of African comparative development, each seeking to solve parts of the puzzles and paradoxes outlined above. The first two chapters reconstruct the welfare of smallholders and labour migrants and investigate their productive and migratory choices. The third chapter outlines some of the particular conditions under which colonialism operated in Uganda, relying on a coalition with indigenous elites, limited structural change and de facto racial segregation on the labour market. The final two chapters address the nature and drivers of Uganda’s cotton export revolution in a broader comparative perspective. They address the role of environmental...
constraints, rainfall seasonality in particular, and the role of colonial policies in lifting such constraints for cotton producers in colonial and postcolonial Africa.

Collectively, the chapters show how a set of local conditions conspired to explain Uganda’s particular path of rural commercialization. The widespread adoption of cotton was not the result of productivity gains or specialisation in agriculture, but hinged on a set of particular local conditions. Indigenous farmers benefited from an ample supply of cheap migrants, who originated from exceptionally labour abundant neighbouring territories. The presence of South Asian capital and entrepreneurship reduced the gap between grower- and world-market prices for cotton. Outside the agricultural sector, opportunities were limited. Most importantly, however, the production possibilities of Ugandan households were substantially enhanced by a favourable rainfall pattern that allowed them to harvest twice per year and retain food self-sufficiency while adopting a nonedible cash crop. These conditions set Uganda apart from other parts in Africa where cotton was attempted but failed.

Notwithstanding a thriving export crop economy, key elements of Uganda’s economic implosion during the 1970s and 1980s were inherent in its colonial boom. The expansion of export cultivation was the outcome of a process of extensive growth, based on the diffusion of new cash crop and greater access to export markets, rather than sustained productivity gains and technological and structural change. Agricultural yields were stagnant during the colonial period, and labour specialisation and occupational diversification were very limited. While African households proved responsive to markets for their labour and crops, colonial agricultural policies can be qualified as complacent, lacking developmental ambition beyond consolidating and sustaining cotton and coffee exports. In other areas, such as education, colonial policies had a divisive rather than a diffusive effect, amplifying inequities along lines of gender, race, and ethnicity, thus providing the building blocks for Uganda’s tragic postcolonial history.

In all, the case of Uganda highlights that Africa’s historical pattern of dispersed booms and busts was underpinned by the diversity of local conditions, not only in terms of precolonial institutions and colonial and missionary policies, as the “new economic history of Africa” has amply demonstrated, but also in terms of resource endowments and environmental conditions.

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