

“An exception that proves the rule? Uganda’s cotton revolution in a comparative Sub-Saharan African perspective”

Michiel de Haas
Wageningen University
michiel.dehaas@wur.nl

The European colonial powers were highly interested in exporting cotton from their sub-Saharan African colonies to feed metropolitan industries. However, colonial era attempts to introduce cotton as an export crop have generally been associated with failure and, in attempt to avert it, coercion. Aggregate exports of cotton from sub-Saharan Africa during the colonial era were indeed dwarfed by those from Asia (Turkey, Russia, India, China), the Americas (USA, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Argentina) and north Africa (Egypt). Isaacman & Roberts go as far as to claim that “cotton and coercion almost invariably went hand in hand. Cotton was not only the premier colonial crop, it was the premier forced crop.”¹ A range of factors has been invoked to explain this story of failure and coercion. Being a labour intensive crop, offering only scanty returns to growers, cotton is said not to have appealed to African smallholders, who preferred to cultivate other, more profitable cash crops such as groundnuts, palm oil or cocoa, or to focus their energies on food crop cultivation. Moreover, African geography – nutrition deficient soils and irregular rainfall – is said to disfavour cotton.

The story, however, is not as straightforward as it may seem. Colonial Uganda’s cotton exports ranked 4th in 1927-28, and 9th in 1960 (in per capita terms). Uganda’s cotton was cultivated throughout the colonial era by millions of smallholders who used the proceeds from cotton not only to pay taxes, but also to buy basic consumer goods, accumulate wealth and educate their children. Some have invoked southern Uganda’s particular banana-based farming system as the key to understanding this atypical reaction to the introduction of cotton. However, smallholders in Uganda’s north-eastern grain-based farming zones were also heavily involved in cotton cultivation, while banana farmers in Western Uganda hardly grew cotton at all. Hence, that fact that Uganda defies the general sub-Saharan African pattern seems to defy a simple mono-causal explanation. To understand the exception may help us to also better grasp the more general ‘rule’ of smallholder reluctance to grow cotton and the determinants of failure and forced cultivation under colonial rule.

This paper has two components. First, it compiles a database (on the basis of secondary literature) of colonial attempts to export cotton in 15 sub-Saharan African colonies. It uses the Boolean comparative method to review the explanatory power of a range of local determinants.² Secondly, it zooms in on one particular area in Uganda, the Teso sub-region. Smallholders in Teso, cultivated a sizeable share of Uganda’s total export cotton, even though their subsistence depended on labour-intensive millet. Data for this case study has been collected through archival research and field interviews.

¹ Isaacman, A., & Roberts, R. L. (Eds.). (1995). *Cotton, colonialism and social history in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, p. 29

² Ragin, C. C. (2014). *The comparative method: Moving beyond qualitative and quantitative strategies*: Univ of California Press.