2007

How maize became the dominant food crop in Africa

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jamie_monson/1/
Africa, he notes, were also located in a very advantageous position for commerce with the New World, including the import of ‘highly nutritious New World crops’ (pp. 81–6). However, none of this explains the earlier Muslim slave trades, so central to Davis’s cultural argument. The only basis offered is also cultural, drawn from John Thornton’s statement that ‘slaves were the only form of private, revenue-producing property recognized in African law’ (p. 89). Here Davis might have taken into account the issue of population–territory ratios which is widely accepted as the basis for the prevalence of slavery within Africa (and is cited by Davis when discussing the aftermath of emancipation in the Caribbean). A similar disregard for the internal dynamics of African economic life leads Davis to his one serious mis-statement on the history of the continent: a claim that ‘when the European demand suddenly ended in the 1850s and 1860s, the African slave-making mechanism continued to operate, flooding various regions with nonexportable slaves. There seemed to be no economic alternative’ (p. 100). The entire historiography of nineteenth-century ‘legitimate trade’ and its internal use of servile labor is simply ignored here.

In any case, readers will not turn to this book for the history of Africa but rather to see how Africa fits into a larger Atlantic history. Davis, with his cultural approach, has a good deal to contribute here. In his central argument about American history, he moves in an opposite direction, contending that the economic centrality of slavery tends to be overlooked so that the descendants of slaves are perceived as a ‘problem’ within a culture which could not have come into existence without the forced labor of their African ancestors. Historians of Africa can thus applaud Davis for underlining the significance of our work, even if he does not enter into it as energetically as that of the other two sides of the Atlantic triangle.

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HOW MAIZE BECAME THE DOMINANT FOOD CROP IN AFRICA

doi:10.1017/S0021853707002575

KEY WORDS: Agriculture, nutrition.

In this concise yet comprehensive monograph, James McCann deploys his considerable skills as a synthesizer to explain how maize, despite its nutritional and environmental constraints, has come to be the dominant food crop in Africa. The book provides a broad sweep, drawing on material from a diverse set of illustrative case studies to go beyond the classic 1966 survey carried out by Marvin Miracle. McCann shows how maize facilitated the expansion of cultivation frontiers into the forests of West Africa; how it supported African political formation from the Asante kingdom to apartheid South Africa; and how it increased vulnerability to malarial infection in Ethiopia. McCann debunks some popular myths about maize, for example the idea that it was brought to Africa by the Portuguese. Rather, he shows that maize followed multiple pathways into the African continent, the Portuguese having been influential in the south while in northern Nigeria maize traveled along the networks of the Saharo-Sahelian trade routes.
In fact, McCann tells us, maize is not a grain at all, but a vegetable—originally cultivated in intercropped garden plots as a starchy snack to be consumed during the hungry season. Maize only came to play the role of a grain in Africa over time, emerging in the twentieth century as the commercial white flour so ubiquitous today in African rural and urban diets. Still, this was not a uniform process, as the case of Malawi shows; in specific economies maize remained an integral part of diverse mixed garden farming strategies. The historic success of maize, therefore, lay in its robust adaptability—it could emerge as a large-scale commercial ‘super-grain’ able to provide high yields for feeding migrant workers and urban populations—while at the same time serving the needs of smallholder farmers in a variety of agro-ecological settings.

The book is organized by theme, and these themes are arranged in roughly chronological order. We begin, therefore, with a look at how maize first arrived and spread in Africa; then proceed through a series of well-documented examples of maize’s adoption and its consequences; coming at the end to consider the effects of late- and postcolonial scientific interventions on improving yields and controlling disease. The book’s introduction promises to consider the question of maize’s ‘grace’—asking whether the plant has brought lasting benefits for African well-being—yet this question remains elusive up to the end where it is taken up briefly in the final pages. A more intentional (rather than implicit) discussion of the issue throughout the text might have been helpful, especially given the book’s clever (if corny) title.

There is one awkward section in the book, one that has the potential to be distracting rather than illuminating for the reader, despite its fascinating historical material. In chapter 4 McCann compares the introduction of maize in the northern highlands of Ethiopia with that in Venice, Italy, during the same time period—between 1600 and 1800. While some very important points are mentioned here—for example, the role played by Venetian traders in dispersing maize in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea networks—the comparison does not fit easily with the rest of the book. The overall purpose of the comparison is not readily understood, given the divergent outcome of maize’s introduction in the two cases—begging the question of the significance of the Venetian example within the overall story of maize in Africa. The chapter also has the potential to reinforce notions of Ethiopian agrarian exceptionalism, since this is the only African case that is compared with a European one. On the other hand, this section does serve as a welcome reminder that maize was introduced into European ‘Old World’ economies at the same time that it was introduced into Africa, and it will hopefully encourage further comparative studies that go beyond continental definitions of time and place.

In the end, what makes this book impressive is the way that it combines original fieldwork with a deep understanding of a by now formidable interdisciplinary literature. McCann seems to have enjoyed the challenge of traversing the continent—in fact the globe—to visit archives and research stations, to carry out interviews and to walk through maize fields. He describes with excitement what it was like to discover an original maize leaf cutting from the 1949 American rust outbreak, pasted into a file in the archive at Kew Gardens. He recalls with care and attention the processes of discovery in the field that led him and his Ethiopian colleagues to postulate a relationship between maize and malaria in Gojjam.

Meanwhile, McCann handles secondary materials from the natural and social sciences as well as from the humanities with ease. In typically generous McCann style, he not only credits the work of other scholars but gives them a meaningful voice in his larger narrative of African maize history. His approach allows this important book to make a significant contribution to the new literature on the
history of African crop cultivation, exemplified by such works as Judith Carney’s *Black Rice.* It will become a must-read for students of agricultural and environmental history, geography and African history more generally.

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**ASSERTION RATHER THAN EVIDENCE**

doi:10.1017/S0021853707002587


**KEY WORDS:** North Africa, diaspora, decolonization.

Readers of a certain age will almost certainly as students have encountered Albert Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized,* a book first published in French in 1957. It was a somewhat quirky period-piece, being both ostensibly radical and a confidently psychologistic study. It was written by a Tunisian then famous as a novelist (one of his novels had enjoyed a preface by Albert Camus) at the height of the Algerian war of independence; this – with a preface this time by Jean-Paul Sartre – became a celebrated book. In the 1960s it was often read alongside the better-known work of Frantz Fanon, and Mannoni’s study of the rising in Madagascar. For readers of the Left in the West, it was partly an exercise in self-laceration as Memmi was scathing about any Westerner’s pretensions of sympathy for anti-colonial struggles. ‘Europeans of Europe … intentionally or not, contribute to the perpetuation of colonial oppression’, he wrote, and whilst this might still elicit some support it is surely too simplistic for most modern tastes. There was, however, a subtlety about the book too, a subtlety that has appealed to modern readers interested in multiple identities and the gradations of subjectivity.

The weaknesses of his work in 1957 have, however, been frequently noted. For example, while his prefatory remarks at the opening of the English translation stressed the centrality of what he called ‘the economic aspect of colonisation’, it was a theme with which the book resolutely avoided serious engagement. And while his personal understanding of French colonialism (as a Tunisian born in 1920) illuminated the book, there is a tendency to assume that this could be generalized as characterizing the experience of all colonized people in all colonies. Some of the core of those criticisms could and should be extended to this present volume.

Memmi, who is now professor emeritus in sociology at Nanterre, obviously knows much more and, perhaps understandably, seems to care far more about the Maghreb and contemporary France than he does about the wider world. The original French title, *Portrait du décolonisé; arabo-musulman et de quelques autres,* more accurately reflects the empirical concerns of the book. For example, the second half of this short book purports to reflect upon immigration to the West as a consequence of what he sees as the disaster of decolonization. This chapter is somewhat revealingly called ‘The immigrant’ and in its questionable unfolding of the experiences of both immigrant and ‘host’, the examples are invariably North African and Muslim and the setting is not merely France but Greater Paris.

The really disturbing weakness of this book lies in its architecture. It begins with a short paragraph of acknowledgements. But there are no end- or footnotes and no reading list. Most readers will probably conclude that many of the examples are drawn from newspaper cuttings; the brevity of the anecdotes and the lack of