’The Black Man’s Crop: Cotton, Imperialism and Public-Private Development in Britain’s African Colonies, 1900-1918

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‘The Black Man’s Crop’: Cotton, Imperialism and Public-Private Development in Britain’s African Colonies, 1900-1918

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In the first years of the twentieth century, poor weather and aggressive speculation in futures markets sent the price of raw cotton surging upward after a decade of prices at, or even below, the cost of production in the world’s largest producer, the southern United States. Enthusiastic American farmers organised to warehouse cotton, issue credit and restrict sales to force prices to eight, ten and even fifteen cents per pound. European manufacturers stopped buying cotton, reacting with alarm to this ‘cotton crisis’. Africa became the epicentre of European cotton-growing activities as states and private capitalists raced to find new, untapped sources of cotton. Portugal lured foreign investors with free seed, subsidised freight and tax holidays; American entrepreneurs experimented with cotton in Congo and Sudan; German firms expanded operations in British colonies; and even Bombay’s cotton mill owners invested in Indian and East African cotton fields.[1]

Britain’s manufacturers joined with Manchester and Liverpool merchants to create the British Cotton Growing Association (BCGA) in 1902, a “semi-philanthropic” organisation tasked with encouraging the growth of cotton in the British Empire. Its founders fully intended to profit from their investment in colonial cotton, but deferred dividends for seven years to support a “statesmanlike policy” that would take risks “that no ordinary commercial undertaking would accept”.[2]

Most scholarly work on the BCGA and its counterparts, the French ACC and German KWK, has emphasised direct coercion at the originating end of the commodity chain, where colonial states used violence to recruit and manage labour that market mechanisms alone could not attract.[3] Borrowing some terminology from political scientists, I analyse ‘soft power’ in this paper, examining how the BCGA tried to control labour at the intermediate stages of cotton’s journey from field to factory. Like the ACC and KWK, the BCGA acted at times like a “quasi-state”,[4] but its awkward status led to tension with colonial governments. Half investment fund, half development NGO, the BCGA’s affiliation with free-trading Lancashire required it to disavow state intervention despite the need for cooperation with colonial officials. Its policies tried to direct the public sphere from a commercial position,

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[1] See the annual reports of the International Federation of Master Cotton Spinners’ and Manufacturers’ Associations (or International Cotton Federation, ICF), 1904-1913. Only one company swore off colonies entirely: the German Levantine Cotton Co., which operated in the Ottoman Empire, worked along “purely commercial principles”, leaving the “question of colonising entirely aside” (ICF, *Report of the Sixth International Congress of Delegated Representatives of Master Cotton Spinners' and Manufacturers' Associations, Held in Milan, 1909*, Manchester: ICF, 1909).

[2] William Francis Tewson, *The British Cotton Growing Association: Golden Jubilee, 1904-1954*, Stockport: Cloister Press, 1954, p.20.

[3] Allen F Isaacman & Richard Roberts (eds), *Cotton, Colonialism, and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1995.

[4] Tomas Nonnenmacher & Steve Onyeiwu, ‘Illusion of a Cotton Paradise: Explaining the Failure of the British Cotton Growing Association in Colonial Nigeria’, *Journal of European Economic History* 34:1 (Spring 2005), p.125.

targeting perceived market failures with policies like monopsonistic cotton buying, ginning monopolies, fixed prices and expert supervision that required state authority to carry out. These policies made fictions of Britain's supposedly free markets in colonial produce, and as this article tries to demonstrate, 'soft' control in the hazy region between state power and the market could still be as oppressive and inimical to the best interests of producers as heavy-handed, state-directed cotton growing programmes.

Across Africa, producers subjected to cotton-growing policies had many options for accommodation and resistance. They were not, Allen Isaacman says, "passive recipients of a colonial mandate".[5] They resisted metropolitan impositions directly, but also "used the market against the state", selling their produce to local buyers, tapping into better paying markets across imperial borders, or otherwise subverting cotton-growing regimes.[6] Further, African entrepreneurs were able to transform metropolitan demands for cotton into profitable domestic enterprises. Reacting to resistance in the field, the BCGA abandoned its free-trade orientation and intensified efforts to gain extra-economic control over markets for cotton and labour, appealing to colonial states to exercise 'hard' power on its behalf.

Race and place in the "empire of cotton"[7]

The director of the KWK, Moritz Schanz, addressed the International Cotton Federation in 1910 and declared:

> We consider the following to be the *fundamental conditions for a remunerative cultivation of cotton*: Suitable climate and soil, large extension of suitable tracts, sufficient supply of cheap native labour, and finally, reliable and cheap means of transport.[8]

The southern United States had all of these things, thanks to the legacy of a century of investment and enslavement. What Schanz and other Europeans feared was the disappearance of that "cheap native labour" in the South which made cheap cotton, cheap cotton goods and the entire global system of mass textile consumption feasible.[9] Colonial powers turned to their African possessions for cotton, believing that they already had three out of Schanz's four requirements; the creation of transportation infrastructure was seen as merely a matter of time and political will, given the potential of African land, labour and climate.

Schanz was right about the criterion for the cheap production of labour-intensive commodities. Unfortunately for the colonial powers, he and his colleagues were quite wrong in assuming that these conditions could be met in Africa. Transportation was neither easy nor cheap,[10] and while there was plenty of arable land, little of it was anything like the rich river

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[5] Allen F. Isaacman, *Cotton Is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938-1961*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996, p.9.
[6] Thomas J. Bassett, *The Peasant Cotton Revolution in West Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.15.
[7] Sven Beckert, 'Cotton: a Global History', in *Interactions: Transregional Perspectives on World History*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005a, pp.48-63.
[8] Moritz Schanz, 'Colonial Cotton Growing and Germany, 1910', in *7th ICF Conference Report*, Brussels, 1910.
[9] J. Arthur Hutton, *The Cotton Crisis. Paper Read Before the Economic Section of the British Association, Cambridge, August 22, 1904*, Manchester: BCGA, 1904a, p.12.
[10] See, for instance, Clarence B. Davis & Kenneth E. Wilburn (eds), *Railway Imperialism*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1991.

delta lands of the Mississippi or Nile.[11] The tropics also received less sunlight in the summer than subtropical latitudes, reducing the yield of cotton plants.[12] Tropical agricultural science was still in its infancy, and naïve assumptions about the innate fecundity of African soils guided most of the early cotton-growing projects.[13]

What Africa did have was an African population, which was for imperial powers synonymous with "cheap native labor".[14] BCGA Chairman J. Arthur Hutton was sure that cotton was not suited to white proprietors, being a time-consuming, soil-depleting crop whose cultivation had defied a half-century of mechanisation. As Hutton told a wartime committee on cotton in 1917, cotton was "the black man's crop".[15] Schanz explicitly listed "a strong coloured population, easily accustomed to agricultural work at low wages" as Togo's most crucial asset for cotton growing.[16] Race became an excuse to put the BCGA between producers and the market. In British colonies, it determined where the BCGA worked, how its capital and services would be administered, and how free producers would be to control their daily lives.

Having settled on Africa, colonialists vigorously debated how cotton would best be grown. British merchant and humanitarian activists favoured a *laissez-faire* model of peasant production that would give producers a "vent" for their supposed surpluses of labour.[17] But not everyone was convinced that a free peasantry could produce cotton on the scale Lancashire's hungry mills needed. As an American cotton expert put it:

> The natives of Africa … are not especially interested in the matter of an abundant supply of cotton at a low price for the cotton spinners of Europe … They will not grow cotton from sympathy for European spinners, nor can they expect to derive any fun or amusement from a crop requiring careful attention the greater part of the year.[18]

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[11] Read P. Dunn, *Cotton in Africa*, Memphis: National Cotton Council, 1950, pp.8-9.
[12] As Philip Porter put it, "Never was so much misplaced effort devoted to an enterprise as the production of cotton in sub-Saharan colonial Africa. The photosynthetic difference [between tropical and subtropical latitudes] and cotton's wide production in large, better-suited areas doomed from the start the metropolitan dream of developing a competitive cotton industry in tropical Africa" (Philip W. Porter, 'A note on cotton and climate: a colonial conundrum', in Isaacman & Roberts (1995), p.47).
[13] Isaacman & Roberts (1995), pp.13-14.
[14] Isaacman (1996), p.3.
[15] Minutes of Evidence relating to Imports of Cotton taken before the Board of Trade Committee on Textile Industries, evidence of J. Arthur Hutton, given 8 June 1916, University of Birmingham Special Collections, BCGA papers, BCGA 2/6/1. Ironically, Americans were encouraging the immigration of Italians to the South, believing that they could replace black Americans in cotton fields. As Sir Charles Macara, Lancashire's self-appointed spokesman, said, the Italian immigrants "were infinitely superior to the negroes, who are hopeless as regards getting to be possessors of the soil themselves" (Minutes of a meeting with Sir Percy Girouard, 12 January 1911, BCGA 1/4/6. See also *Manufacturers' Record* (Baltimore), 7 April 1904).
[16] Moritz Schanz, 'Colonial Cotton Growing and Germany, 1911', in *8th ICF Conference Report*, Barcelona, 1911.
[17] K. D. Nworah, 'The Liverpool 'sect' and British West African policy, 1895-1915', *African Affairs* 70:281 (1971a) pp.349-64. See A. G. Hopkins, *An economic history of West Africa*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1973, pp.231-6 for the standard interpretation of the 'vent for surplus' theory in a West African context.
[18] Col. Alfred B. Shepperson, *Manufacturers' Record*, 17 September 1903, p.155.

Wage-labour plantations were an obvious solution, but these were officially discouraged in British colonies, and the BCGA's own plantation experiments were disastrous failures.[19] Most imperial powers turned to some coercive variant on the peasant-production scheme.

Thomas Bassett describes the three prevailing models in European colonies. In the "rational peasant development discourse":

> farmers were treated as knowledgeable and rational economic agents who would increase cotton supplies if purchase prices were sufficiently attractive and if they were allowed to grow cotton following customary methods.

States held back, merely enforcing the rules. In the "compulsory development discourse", peasants were seen:

> as unwilling to produce cotton for export markets unless forced to do so by the colonial state. This generally racist view represented Africans as apathetic and lazy by nature … The colonial state's primary role was surveillance.

The "paternalistic development discourse… combined elements of these first two".[20] France, Germany and Britain used all three models at various periods.[21]

As a Manchester merchant, Hutton was allied with interests strongly supportive of the 'rational peasant'. But in his leadership of the BCGA he advocated a paternalistic and racially-tinged model. Maintaining a near-religious faith in the power of markets to call forth supplies, he nonetheless doubted the ability of Africans to respond to the 'invisible hand' without a strong push from business and government. The BCGA hoped to "try, as far as possible, to get inside the black's mind, so that we can most readily lead him on the line of his natural development".[22] The BCGA thus assumed that its task was to convince peasants uninvolved in market economies that cash-crop production was viable, believing that backwardness and peasant conservatism stood between would-be cotton growers and capitalist market relations under colonial rule. As Hutton told E. D. Morel in a pointed letter following criticism of land expropriations in Nigeria:

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[19] Hutton (1904a, p.17) preferred not "to dogmatise on a doubtful point" when stating the BCGA's official policy in favour of peasants. Historians have agreed with the BCGA's statements that its plantations were mere experiments (W. A. Wardle, 'A History of the British Cotton Growing Association, 1902-39, with Special Reference to Its Operations in Northern Nigeria', PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1980; Jan S. Hogendorn, 'The cotton campaign in Northern Nigeria, 1902-1914: an early example of a public/private planning failure in agriculture', in Isaacman & Roberts (1995), pp.50-70; Steve Onyeiwu, 'Deceived by African Cotton: The British Cotton Growing Association and the Demise of the Lancashire Textile Industry', *African Economic History* 28 (2000), pp.89-121), but the BCGA's own records show that the plantations were intended to launch a commercial industry (Himbury tour diary, 27 June 1904, BCGA 7/3/1).

[20] Bassett (2001), p.55.

[21] Richard L. Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional Economy in the French Soudan, 1800-1946*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996; Bassett (2001); T. Sunseri, 'The Baumwollfrage: Cotton Colonialism in German East Africa', *Central European History* 34:1 (2001), pp.31-51; Sven Beckert, 'From Tuskegee to Togo: The Problem of Freedom in the Empire of Cotton', *Journal of American History* 92:2 (September 2005b), pp.498-526; A. Zimmerman, 'A German Alabama in Africa: The Tuskegee Expedition to German Togo and the Transnational Origins of West African Cotton Growers', *American Historical Review* 110:5 (2005) pp.1362-98; Wardle (1980).

[22] Alfred Emmott, quoted in ICF, *Official Report, Second International Conference of Cotton Growers, Spinners, and Manufacturers, Held at Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A., October 7th, 8th and 9th, 1907*, Manchester: Taylor, Garnett, Evans, 1908, pp.113-4.

> We want the land for the good of the native, and it would really be idiotic if we were to allow native prejudices to stand in the way of all progress. If you will think the matter over, you will see that our plantation is in exactly the same position as the railway, and I don't think anyone … would argue that native prejudices should be allowed to stand in the way and prevent the construction of the railway.[23]

This contradictory adherence to both a classical economic model and an inherently racial view of cotton production produced ineffective and increasingly cynical and controlling policies.

Peasants and prices

While race was an important factor, the urgency of the cotton crisis also helped BCGA planners overcome prevailing economic theory. As one pamphleteer wrote:

> The solution of this problem is without doubt of immediate and overwhelming importance to Lancashire, and so long as it is accomplished it matters little or nothing if what is called fiscal orthodoxy is or is not outraged in the effort.[24]

The most direct outcome of this ideological shift away from strict *laissez-faire* was the BCGA's fixed price policy. Like the Marketing Boards formed by colonial powers in the 1930s in response to the depression,[25] fixed prices were designed to insulate primary producers from the vagaries of the world market. Believing that the high prices of the cotton crisis would last, the BCGA planned to pocket a surplus over the price it offered to producers, taking a loss to meet the fixed price in later years when prices might fall. As it turned out, prices crashed in the summer of 1904, forcing the BCGA to re-examine its price targets almost immediately.

Even before prices fell, the BCGA demanded monopoly privileges to minimise its losses, arguing that such a deviation from free trade principles was required to avoid the "danger of the industry being fostered on an artificial basis", leaving producers discouraged when prices fell and supports were withdrawn.[26] Colonial officials generally agreed with the principle of fixed prices, believing that peasants could not follow global market shifts, and they shared the BCGA's view "that that it was imperative to avoid setting [prices] too high in case the price should come down later".[27]

By only partially abandoning free market principles, the BCGA opened the door to price practices that worked against producers. 'Commercial principles' could be invoked to break fixed price agreements whenever profits were threatened. Producers and colonial officials were often put in a bind, having responded to Lancashire's appeals for cotton only to find that the BCGA refused to buy it at a worthwhile price. J. R. Prince, one of the first experts dispatched to Southern Nigeria, was denied the authority to modestly raise prices on

[23] Hutton to Morel, 16 May 1905, London School of Economics Special Collections, E.D. Morel Papers, (MP) F9/2 189.
[24] J. Howard Reed, 'Cotton Growing within the British Empire', in Co-Operative and Wholesale Society, *Annual*, 1911, p.13.
[25] G. Williams, 'Marketing without and with marketing boards: the origins of state marketing boards in Nigeria', *Review of African Political Economy* 12:34 (1985), pp.4-15.
[26] Interview with Sir William Manning, 30 January 1913, BCGA 1/2/7.
[27] BCGA minutes, 30 January 1913, BCGA 1/2/1.

the grounds that "false hopes for the future would be raised".[28] In Gambia, the BCGA council was appalled to hear that the governor had taken the Association's appeals to heart and was buying seed cotton at 2d./lb., a price deemed too high despite the fact that cotton was selling for about 5d. in Liverpool at the time. Colonial Office (CO) officials in Nyasaland were criticised by the BCGA for "buying cotton in places where there were no transport facilities, which would mean a heavy loss", having taken the BCGA at its word that all cotton that could be grown would be bought.[29] During the First World War, the BCGA fought efforts to raise prices up to 9d./lb. for seed cotton, despite record prices cotton in world markets. A BCGA council member "pointed out that the natives were formerly well satisfied with 6 cents per lb.", in effect arguing that market prices should have no correlation to the remuneration of labour in Africa.[30]

Colonial officials grew frustrated with this contradictory approach to markets. As they saw it, the BCGA demanded special privileges but refused to take special responsibilities. Governor Hesketh Bell excoriated the Association for retreating from the unprofitable Benue River area in Northern Nigeria, stating that "the results of 4 years' work by the Political Staff have been for nil".[31] In Gold Coast, the CO compelled the BCGA to continue working there long after it was proven that cocoa, gold and other products would be that country's future exports. Governor Thorburn warned, "if operations cease in the Northern Territories the natives will regard such cessation as a breach of faith." Hutton was told that the ginnery at Labolabo "should be kept open for the benefit of those natives who are already committed to the cultivation of cotton".[32]

Annoyed BCGA leaders eventually accused colonial officials of sabotage, "either by trying to fix the price or suggesting to the natives that they should not sell their cotton, but hold for better prices".[33] H. R. Wallis, Chief Secretary of Uganda, fought back, arguing that he could not "properly advise growers to accept a price which is obviously inadequate".[34] Wallis stated that the BCGA's own demands that administrators act as cotton experts led peasants to "not unnaturally apply to them to solve their perplexities in connection with fluctuating prices".[35]

Besides binding the BCGA to a fluctuating world price for cotton, the fixed price policy had other limitations. First and foremost, peasants were under no obligation to sell the cotton they raised. BCGA manager W.H. Himbury was forced to double (to 1d.) the price paid for seed cotton in Meko, Southern Nigeria, after chiefs refused to sell their remaining cotton or plant any more.[36] As Governor Lugard observed in 1919:

[28] BCGA Executive Committee minutes, 10 July 1903, BCGA 1/1/1.
[29] BCGA-CO minutes, 12 May 1904, BCGA 1/5/1.
[30] BCGA Executive minutes, 28 October 1915, BCGA 1/3/2.
[31] Report by Hesketh Bell, 28 September 1910, enclosed in CO to BCGA, 5 November 1910, BCGA 6/1/1.
[32] Thorburn to Harcourt, enclosed in 14 June 1912, BCGA 6/1/2; Lambert to Hutton, 3 September 1915, BCGA 6/1/4.
[33] BCGA Executive minutes, 19 November 1913, BCGA 1/3/2.
[34] Wallis to CO, 22 April 1914, enclosed in CO to BCGA, 2 June 1914, BCGA 6/1/3.
[35] Wallis to CO, 22 April 1914, enclosed in CO to BCGA, 2 June 1914, BCGA 6/1/3.
[36] Himbury, West Africa tour diary, 34, 1904-5, BCGA 7/3/1.

> The native of Nigeria is extremely shrewd in his estimate of what pays best to cultivate, and … will prefer to take his cotton back again, even after he has brought it to the buying station, rather than accept an unremunerative price.[37]

Farmers also exploited the arbitrary barriers created by colonial powers and shopped their cotton to better-subsidised merchants in neighbouring colonies. Mozambique was a convenient alternative for farmers in Nyasaland, and Gold Coast growers sold their cotton to German buyers in Togo. When the German railroad to Lomé opened in time for the 1909-10 cotton season, exports from Gold Coast ports dropped from 505 bales to a mere 98, demonstrating the extent to which this strategy was practiced.[38] Within Nigeria, the Alafin of Oyo took advantage of special price incentives being offered in his district and gathered cotton from far and wide, dumping it on the BCGA for a windfall profit. A frustrated Himbury told the Alafin that the BCGA "only promised to buy cotton actually grown at Oyo at a certain price", checking the Alafin's entrepreneurial ambitions.[39]

Another unanticipated outcome of the elimination of price competition in the marketplace was the removal of incentives for farmers to monitor quality. Peasants knew that they would get the same price no matter what the condition of their cotton and tended to hastily pick the crop and adulterate it with water or debris to increase its sale weight. This produced a cycle of "adverse selection", which would have eventually destroyed the industry through tit-for-tat drops in quality and price.[40] Instead of opening up pricing to competitive bidding, the BCGA and colonial administrations responded by enacting draconian legislation controlling how cotton was to be grown, processed, and sold.

African entrepreneurs were further able to redirect BCGA agricultural policies to benefit local industries. Far from sounding "the death knell of indigenous handicraft industries", colonial cotton growing gave local industries a short-lived but intense stimulus.[41] New long stapled cottons introduced by colonial powers were easier to hand-spin, and in French colonies their introduction "led to new opportunities for economic growth and new ways for women to enhance their autonomy and their income".[42] A pioneer ginnery opened by the ACC in Segu could only send samples to France in 1904-05, because local spinners paid an unbelievable two francs per kilogram for the ginned cotton.[43] In Nigeria, the BCGA unwittingly helped Kano's famed cloth industry boom. Director of agriculture, P. H. Lamb, found that Kano's spinners were importing cotton from other parts of Nigeria in quantities that noticeably reduced exports. He observed that "the prices paid locally bear no relation to those of the Liverpool Exchange and happen to be on such a basis that to compete for purposes of export is often a most unprofitable undertaking".[44] Lamb found the situation

[37] Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene (ed.), *Lugard and the Amalgamation of Nigeria*, London: F. Cass, 1968, p.112.

[38] Raymond E. Dumett, 'Obstacles to Government-Assisted Agricultural Development in West Africa: Cotton-Growing Experimentation in Ghana in the Early Twentieth Century', *Agricultural History Review* 23: 2 (1975), p.167; Zimmerman (2005), p.34; Elias Mandala, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, p.265; Wardle (1980), p.551.

[39] Himbury, West Africa tour diary, 141, 1905, BCGA 7/3/1.

[40] Torbjörn Engdahl, 'The Exchange of Cotton: Ugandan Peasants, Colonial Market Regulations, and the Organisation of International Cotton Trade, 1904-1918', PhD thesis, University of Uppsala, 1999, p.153.

[41] Bassett (2001), p.52; Roberts (1996), p.52; Beckert (2005b), p.30. This is contrary to the argument of Marion Johnson ('Cotton Imperialism in West Africa', *African Affairs* 73:291 (1974), pp.178-187) that the BCGA destroyed indigenous industries, turning artisans into peasants See also Michael Watts, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine, & Peasantry in Northern Nigeria*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, p.173.

[42] Roberts (1996), pp.94-5.

[43] Roberts (1996), p.86.

[44] Lamb to CO, 2 August 1914, enclosed in 8 August 1914, BCGA 6/1/4.

ironic, duly stating that "[i]t is a regrettable thing, from Lancashire's point of view (and therefore perhaps from the Imperial standpoint) that the native weaving industry retains its popularity", while also pointing out that "the home-spun" was a superior product, "preferred, largely I understand on account of its greater durability".[45] In the midst of the First World War, Lamb reported that Nigerian spinners enjoyed "brisk demand", and more surprisingly, that "the popularity of Kano cloth is spreading not only to Europeans but to natives of Lagos and other large towns".[46]

By late 1915, the metropolitan government recognised this phenomenon and withdrew official support for the BCGA, declaring that:

> the work of the Association there has mainly consisted in an attempt to provide an export market in competition with local markets … That attempt, in Mr. Bonar Law's opinion, must be deemed to have failed.[47]

Even under the conditions of colonial rule, then, entrepreneurs were able to absorb new sources of cotton at prices that foiled European efforts to divert cotton to export markets.

As the BCGA slowly discovered, African farmers not only already grew cotton, but were thoroughly enmeshed in local and regional market networks. The real question was not whether Africans could grow cotton but whether or not cotton could generate an attractive return under the BCGA's conditions. Evidence shows that it rarely did. During a 1910 tour of Nigeria, Morel found that an acre of yams could bring £8-10 per year, while an acre of cotton would only net £3-4 at the 1d./lb. being offered by the BCGA at the time.[48] In terms of rival export crops, Jan Hogendorn states that groundnuts paid 100 percent more than cotton per acre, and required less labour.[49]

Race and finance

One of the most transformative aspects of BCGA policy was its financing of crops and machinery, giving farmers the capital needed to dramatically increase yields per acre and unit of labour. Unfortunately for Africans, this kind of 'soft power' only helped white farmers. Financial aid was strictly regulated by an elision of race and class. Whites were 'planters', landowners or leaseholders worthy of loans and subsidies; blacks were 'peasants' and received only free seed and the dubious gift of expert advice. While the BCGA's initial statement of purpose made no mention of support for white planters in the colonies,[50] the association was deluged with correspondence from planters eager for information and aid.[51]

[45] Lamb, Report on Northern Nigerian Cotton, July 1914, enclosed in 19 October 1914, BCGA 6/1/4.
[46] Lamb, report dated 4 March 1915, BCGA 6/1/4.
[47] John Anderson to Lord Derby, 28 December 1915, BCGA 6/1/4.
[48] E. D. Morel, *Nigeria: Its Peoples and Its Problems*, London: Cass, 1968, p.243; P. S. Nyambara, 'Colonial Policy and Peasant Cotton Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia, 1904-1953', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33:1 (2000), p.87.
[49] Hogendorn (1995), pp.64-5.
[50] Minutes, 9 April 1902, BCGA 1/1/1.
[51] By 1913, the BCGA had answered some 62,113 letters (A. H. Milne, *Sir Alfred Lewis Jones, K.C.M.G., a Story of Energey and Success*, Liverpool: H. Young & Sons, 1914, p.68).

By 1905, the BCGA was loaning more to white planters (£13,757) than it was spending on seed, transport, experts and propaganda for West African farmers (£9,975).[52]

The salvation of white landowners in the Caribbean from the moribund sugar economy was the BCGA's greatest pre-war success story.[53] Cotton exports from the region rose from a mere 9,676 bales in 1902 to 186,510 in 1907.[54] BCGA agents helped diversify the islands, building a cotton-seed mill and encouraging the use of citric acid and arrowroot starch in Lancashire bleaching and weaving factories.[55] But only white planters received loans and grants. Only whites were eligible to have their cotton classed as 'superfine', despite the fact that black farmers on the same islands were producing "first class ordinary cottons".[56] Across the empire, funds dedicated to research dwindled as advances to planters consumed ever-greater proportions of the BCGA budget. A paltry £686 was spent on research in 1912, while £44,128 was advanced to planters.[57]

Meanwhile, the BCGA flatly rejected the idea of financing peasant agriculture. H. H. Lardner, self-described as an "educated native" of Sierra Leone in full support of "the great Cotton Growing Movement in Lancashire", pointed out the need for finance capital early in the BCGA campaign. In a February 1904 speech he argued that subsidies or cash advances were critical, along with an introductory period of fixed prices: "Unless this announcement is publicly made it is feared that confidence will never be so far restored in the natives as to induce them to grow cotton".[58] The BCGA took no notice of Lardner's proposal. Hutton believed that an African peasantry "can get on perfectly well without any advance whatsoever", in stark contrast to the miserable conditions of American sharecroppers or Indian *ryots* who survived on merchant capital lent at usurious rates.[59] The CO raised the question of an Agricultural Bank for West Africa in 1906, referencing the successful "micro-lending" done by such banks in Jamaica, but the BCGA objected on the grounds that in Africa "[t]he native could give no individual security as he did not own the land, and there were objections to a tribal security".[60]

Besides financially supporting white planters, the BCGA withheld its support for peasant production in settler colonies. The BCGA promised that it "had no intention at the present time to encourage Native cultivation in that part of Rhodesia, suitable for plantations carried on by Europeans",[61] also agreeing with Nyasaland's agricultural department that neither party should "encourage native cotton cultivation in close proximity to European estates".[62] White-owned cotton plantations were a complete failure, however. Notwithstanding his former support for planters, McCall, Nyasaland's director of agriculture, said that:

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52 BCGA reports, 1903-4, BCGA 2/1/1-2; 1st Annual Report of Chartered Association, August 1905, BCGA 2/1/3.
53 Barbara Gaye Jaquay, 'The Caribbean Cotton Production: An Historical Geography of the Region's Mystery Crop', PhD thesis, Texas A&M University, 1997.
54 BCGA minutes, 7 April 1908, BCGA 1/2/1.
55 BCGA minutes, 3 November 1908, BCGA 1/2/1; Nevis Ltd. to Hutton, 17 September 1908, enclosure in Hutton daybook 3, BCGA 7/2/3; Algernon E. Aspinall to Hutton, 2 October 1908, BCGA 6/3.
56 BCGA West Indies Committee minutes, 13 September 1911, BCGA 1/4/5.
57 Annual Report, December 1912, BCGA 2/1/11.
58 H. H. Lardner, 'The Cotton Growing Problem', February 1904, in BCGA 2/2/3.
59 J. Arthur Hutton, *The Work of the British Cotton Growing Association.*, Manchester: BCGA, 1904, p.35.
60 BCGA-CO Reports, 8 March 1906, BCGA 1/5/2. On the Jamaican banks, see W. M. Turner, 'The Christiana People's Co-Operative Bank, Ltd. ', *West Indian Bulletin* 6 (1906), pp.250-3.
61 BCGA Executive minutes, 25 August 1910, BCGA 1/3/1.
62 BCGA Executive minutes, 19 March 1912, BCGA 1/3/1.

> if the [BCGA] had spent the same money as they have spent on advances to planters in erecting ginneries and aiding the native cultivation … a much larger cotton Industry would be established in the country.[63]

By 1912 the BCGA tried to disengage from its commitments to white planters in Africa,[64] and by 1918 it had lost £90,826 – nearly 20% of its entire capital – on bad loans across Africa and the West Indies.[65]

Indirect coercion and the marketplace

Instead of pursuing innovation and structural change that might have made the BCGA's overtures to peasants profitable, the Association responded to poor results by turning to direct and indirect coercion through cooperating intermediaries. Before its work had even started in mid-1902, the BCGA proposed that cotton be accepted in lieu of money for the payment of the new 'hut taxes' that cash-strapped administrations were imposing across the colonies, creating structural conditions conducive to the BCGA's demand-side ginnery-building policy.[66] Nyasaland had doubled its taxes in 1901, and 50 percent discounts were then offered to those possessing certificates showing that they had worked on a white-owned plantation growing cotton, tobacco or coffee.[67] But taxation had its limits. As frustrated planters in Nyasaland found, workers would abscond as soon they worked long enough to win tax certificates. "While taxation may have been a necessary 'push factor,'" says Ken Swindell in his examination of wage labour and transportation in Nigeria, "it was never a sufficient one".[68]

Tax policies did not work for the BCGA or other capitalists because they were a means to financial solvency for colonial states, rather than tools to help metropolitan industries. In Uganda, the government encouraged peasants to grow cotton, but "in areas where alternative employment options existed, the government decided not to press the peasants to grow cotton".[69] Cocoa prevailed in Gold Coast and Southern Nigeria, and groundnuts beat out cotton in Northern Nigeria and Gambia.

Yet colonial rulers did work to some extent on Lancashire's behalf, and it is clear that some officials ordered their subjects to grow cotton in preference to other crops. Morel received a letter alleging that:

> The people [in Nigeria] dare not object to grow it because the Government tells them to do it. The village chiefs in their turn tell them that the Government has

[63] Mandala (1990), p.128.
[64] BCGA-CO Report, 9 May 1912, BCGA 1/5/2.
[65] Wardle (1980), pp.566-7. Only £3,479 was lost in the West Indies, compared to £24,700 in Nyasaland and Rhodesia, £12,902 in East Africa and Uganda, and a staggering £42,000 in West Africa, which included the cost of the BCGA's own failed plantations.
[66] John Hose, 'Britain and the development of West African cotton, 1845-1960', PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1970, p.207.
[67] Mandala (1990), p.112. The rebates were not abolished until 1921.
[68] K. Swindell, 'The Struggle for Transport Labor in Northern Nigeria, 1900-1912: A Conflict of Interests', *African Economic History* 20 (1992), p.153.
[69] Engdahl (1999), p.116.

> ordered this to be done, and out of fear these men go on planting cotton and receive no compensation in any way commensurate with the work done.[70]

A Ugandan official proudly told Hutton in 1912 that "[f]or some years the Government have pointed out that it is the Duty of every good Citizen to cultivate Cotton and the increase is almost entirely due to Government influence".[71] Jan Hogendorn argues the perception of official coercion was quite common, even when direct orders were not issued.[72] Lamb was in fact concerned that government distribution of cotton seed "has a moral effect by creating an impression that 'Government expects' cotton to be grown for export in preference to other crops", fearing that the colony's subjects might lose out on more profitable crops.[73]

The colonial state undoubtedly had a privileged position from which to influence the behaviour of producers, but indigenous elites were also used by the BCGA to increase cotton cultivation. Elias Mandala argues that the successful production of export commodities in British colonies "depended on their capacity to deploy the indigenous elites".[74] Overtures for cotton were often treated as opportunities for economic gain by elites. For instance, when Himbury visited the Alake of Aro in 1905, he reported that:

> The Egbas [sic] are glad they planted cotton and have promised to plant more this season … The Alake opens some champagne and agrees to subscribe for 100 shares in the Association as he seems very pleased with the work we are doing.[75]

In Uganda, the Kabaka and upper nobility had been allotted estates in 1900, and local elites were granted considerable extensions of their authority in exchange for cooperation with the British.[76] Chiefs routinely had their subjects grow cotton on communal plots, offering beer and food in exchange for labour.[77] The Kabaka's direct role in cotton growing is unclear, but the BCGA appreciated his services enough to spend £150 hosting his entourage during a 1913 visit to Manchester. BCGA minutes state that it "was money well spent", hoping that "the visit of the Kabaka and his chiefs would prove very beneficial to cotton-growing in Uganda".[78]

Peasants had ways of resisting the pressure from local elites, however. Northern Nigerian peasants, often still bound by slave status to local elites, simply walked away, protected by colonial anti-slavery statutes.[79] Ugandan peasants slipped away with their cotton at night and sold it directly to European firms, selling it for less than the official price to

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[70] John Holt to Morel, 13 July 1906, MP F8/3, quoted in K. D. Nworah, 'The West African Operations of the British Cotton Growing Association, 1904-1914', *African Historical Studies* 4 (1971b), p.324.
[71] BCGA Executive minutes, 17 May 1912, BCGA 1/3/1.
[72] Hogendorn (1995), p.59.
[73] Lamb to CO, 2 August 1914, enclosed in CO to BCGA, 8 August 1914, BCGA 6/1/4. Lamb's point was not that peasants should not be pressured to grow crops, but rather that they should grow whatever would pay the best and earn the colony the most revenue.
[74] Mandala (1990), p.111.
[75] Himbury, West Africa tour diary, 144, 1905, BCGA 7/3/1.
[76] Thomas Frank Taylor, 'The Role of the British Cotton Industry in the Establishment of a Colonial Economy in Uganda, 1902 - 1939', PhD thesis, Syracuse University, 1981, pp.18-9; T. V. Sathyamurthy, *The Political Development of Uganda: 1900-1986*, Aldershot: Gower, 1986, p.212.
[77] Engdahl (1999), pp.60-1.
[78] BCGA minutes, 12 August 1913, BCGA 1/2/1. See also *Visit of the Kabaka of Uganda to Manchester*, BCGA pamphlet, July 28-31, 1913, in BCGA 1/4/6.
[79] P. E. Lovejoy & J. S. Hogendorn, *Slow death for slavery: the course of abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897-1936*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; Nonnenmacher & Onyeiwu (2005), pp.141-3.

bypass the taxes imposed by chiefs in their roles as middlemen.[80] Authority was also directly challenged when the costs of compliance outweighed the relatively slight dangers of rebellion. Hesketh Bell, then governor of Uganda, was shocked to find cotton left on stalks to rot in fields planted under the oversight of colonial officers. Without the officers present, local chiefs lacked the power to make peasants harvest the cotton. Bell said:

> The idea of having now to carry their crops on their heads all the way to ginnery at Kampala, ninety miles off, was, however, much more than they were prepared to do, even to please the chiefs or the government.[81]

In 1912, peasants in some regions of Uganda went so far as to burn their crops in preference to wasting labour on what they deemed to be a poorly paying crop.[82]

Such extremes were uncommon, but they illustrate how flimsy the mechanisms of coercion could be in Britain's African empire. Instead of recognising the ability of producers to resist and redirect metropolitan demands, British observers merely reinforced existing stereotypes about the 'laziness' or 'conservatism' of peasant producers.[83] As the soap baron William Lever complained in a letter explaining the transfer of his palm oil operations from Nigeria to Congo, he wanted a place where "[t]he Natives, in all probability, will not have been spoiled and contaminated" by a "soft" colonial state.[84]

Rule of experts

The ability of peasants to defy indigenous elites as well as colonial authorities convinced the BCGA that an intensive array of technical instruction, surveillance and regulation would be required to extract meaningful amounts of cotton of consistent quality from peasant producers. While this technocratic regime of agricultural control would not mature until the 1920-30s,[85] its origins lay in the cotton campaign of 1902-14. No other commodity excited such attention and frustrated so many metropolitan visions. Two aspects of this "rule of experts" stand out:[86] the deployment of technical expertise to reshape African work processes, and the creation of a monopsony for regulatory purposes.

The BCGA's experts performed the same functions as later state agricultural staff, lecturing in the countryside, running demonstration farms and training local inspectors. A racial discourse permeated their epistemology of agriculture: long-held biases among Europeans caricatured Africans as ignorant of agricultural "science", barely "scratching" the earth with hoes and reaping a bountiful harvest through the innate fecundity of African soils.[87] The trope of peasant conservatism was already widespread: in one of the BCGA's first field reports, its expert in the Gambia complained that the natives "were very slow in adopting new

[80] Engdahl (1999), p.69.
[81] Taylor (1981), p.37.
[82] Engdahl (1999), p.58.
[83] See 'Notes by Mr. Himbury on AFRICAN LABOUR', n.d. but c.1920, in BCGA 1/4/6.
[84] Lever to Morel, 11 April 1911, MP F8/100 114.
[85] Joseph Morgan Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007.
[86] See Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, Berkley: University of California Press, 2002.
[87] Hodge (2007), chap. 2.

methods", words to be repeated by foreign experts for decades to come.[88] The task of the expert, then, was to make African labour work more scientifically.

Touring instructors and leaflets in local languages explained how cotton should be grown. New techniques like deep hoeing, ridging, heavy thinning and total uprooting of plants at the end of the season were emphasised, all tasks that required greatly increased labour inputs.[89] A key figure was Gerald C. Dudgeon, who served as Inspector of Agriculture for West Africa. A former planter in India, Dudgeon was appointed to the CO at the BCGA's behest. He condemned African farming practices like shifting cultivation and soil mounding as wasteful and primitive, and thought Africans spent insufficient time weeding, used insufficient fertiliser and ignored seed selection.[90] Such views were not universal, however. A number of colonial officials, like Sir C.A. King-Harman (Governor of Sierra Leone), told the BCGA that their experts were quite unnecessary; "it did not appear to me that the natives required any special instruction in the matter", he said.[91] It was capital, not expertise that King-Harman believed Sierra Leone lacked, and he expressed disappointment that the BCGA had not followed through on promises for bounties and free seeds, tools and freight. Even Dudgeon eventually came to appreciate the benefits of practices like mixed cropping, and was forced to admit that African farms boasted higher cotton yields than the BCGA model estates.

BCGA field records reveal much about how Hutton personally influenced cotton cultivation by emphasising new techniques and machines. Hutton sent tractors, ploughs and planting machines to nearly any white planter or research station in Africa that would take them.[92] McCall tried to stop this transfer of "inappropriate technology" in Nyasaland, warning Hutton that German experiments with gasoline-driven motorised ploughs had not been successful. After suggesting steam ploughs, an exasperated Hutton asked: "You don't know of any motor ploughs which are of any use whatever?" McCall flatly told him that fuel would be too expensive, and that the ploughs were inappropriate for the well-watered soils where cotton grew best anyway. Not dissuaded, Hutton sent out a 'Conqueror' disc plough anyway.[93] Most serious was Paris Green, an arsenic-based chemical that Hutton thought should be widely used to destroy cotton pests and increase yields. He repeatedly tried to get Paris Green distributed in West Africa, and it was not until his visit to Egypt and Sudan in 1911-12 (where he tried to convince an Egyptian manager to start using it) that Hutton learned of its lethality to cattle and humans.[94]

Surveillance, regulation, and control in a colonial free market

After failing to convince the CO "that the export of cotton seed from Lagos should be prohibited, and that the Association should be given control over all seed", the BCGA settled for a monopoly on ginning in Lagos and carried the model to other colonies.[95] The BCGA

[88] BCGA Executive Committee minutes, 3 July 1903, BCGA 1/1/1.
[89] Engdahl (1999), pp.54-5.
[90] Hodge (2007), p.66.
[91] Oldham Chamber of Commerce, 'Growth of Cotton in the Empire: West Coast of Africa', 7, 1902, in BCGA 2/1/1.
[92] BCGA West Africa indents, vol. 1-2, Manchester Central Library Archives, M257/1-2.
[93] BCGA meeting with McCall, 15 December 1911, BCGA 6/1/2; Undersecretary of State H.J. Read to Hutton, 11 April 1912, BCGA 6/1/2.
[94] Hutton, Sudan tour diary, 26, 34, 1911-12, BCGA 7/3/2; see West African Committee minutes, 16 and 20 September, 9 November 1904, Hutton daybook 1, BCGA 7/2/1.
[95] BCGA-CO minutes, 13 October 1904, BCGA 1/5/1.

recognised from the beginning that cotton cultivation could be controlled from the ginnery. Buyers could reject cotton that they thought was mishandled, or of an undesirable variety. Effective enforcement required a monopsony, however, to prevent producers from bypassing fixed prices, using unauthorised seeds, or selling ‘substandard’ cotton elsewhere. The BCGA argued that “undue competition in cotton buying” was “responsible for a good deal of inferior cotton being shipped to Liverpool”, suggesting that only the BCGA, with its “semi-philanthropic” status, could serve as an effective guardian of quality.[96] While maintaining the illusion of freedom for producers to grow and sell cotton, the BCGA worked to shut out forces that might weaken its control over the production and processing of cotton. In Uganda, Indian and African entrepreneurs who had erected hand-cranked roller gins at cotton-growing centres were shut down by expensive licensing requirements at the urging of the BCGA, despite the fact that the dispersed gins dramatically reduced transportation costs for peasants. The BCGA feared that these gins would allow peasants to plant from their own seeds, rather than the imported varieties Lancashire desired.[97]

As shown, peasants had ways of bypassing the BCGA’s monopsony. The BCGA urged colonial states to criminalise these activities and discipline offenders. In an early example, BCGA managers in Lagos sought punishments for producers who brought in cotton deemed to be of poor quality, rather than offering a price differential.[98] Hutton wanted the picking of cotton to be supervised, arguing that if peasants “were compelled to gather their cotton in the proper manner and if there were careful selection of seed we might produce a really satisfactory type of cotton most useful to Lancashire”.[99] In Nyasaland, the BCGA worked closely with the agriculture department to produce the 1910 Cotton Ordinance. The ordinance called for the uprooting and burning of all cotton plants, an effective disease-fighting measure but one that prevented the cultivation of perennial cottons and added an entirely new step to labour routines. All native-grown cotton was also to be ginned within the Protectorate, cutting peasants off from outlets in Mozambique.[100] Such regimes were intended to improve the quality and quantity of cotton, but they did so by dramatically increasing the surveillance of producers and intensifying labour without additional remuneration.

Despite finding several commercially attractive cottons in West Africa,[101] the BCGA decided to eradicate native cottons, taking “particular pains to eliminate all undesirable varieties … and to issue only pure sound seed to the natives”.[102] Pamphlets gave literate farmers and agricultural officials clear instructions:

34. What kind of cotton should be grown?

A: The best kind to grow in Uganda is American.

35. Should the native cotton be grown?

[96] BCGA minutes, 2 June 1908, BCGA 1/2/1.
[97] Engdahl (1999), p.86. Seeds made up 60-80% of the weight of unginned cotton, and on-site ginning would have greatly reduced transportation costs for growers of cotton.
[98] BCGA-CO minutes, 16 November 1905, BCGA 1/5/1.
[99] Hutton, Sudan tour diary, 193, 1911-12, BCGA 7/3/2.
[100] ‘Nyasaland Cotton Ordinance’, 1910, enclosed in 19 August 1911, BCGA 6/1/2. ‘Tree cotton’, as perennial cotton plants were sometimes called, were traditionally allowed to grow for three consecutive seasons in Nigeria, saving considerable labour. Morel (1968), p.236.
[101] BCGA Executive Committee minutes, 28 July 1903, BCGA 1/1/1; J.C. Atkins, ‘The Supply of Cotton’, paper read at the First International Congress of Cotton Spinners and Manufacturers, Zurich, May 23 to 28, 1904, p. 6, in BCGA 2/1/1.
[102] Hutton to CO, 5 February 1908, in BCGA 2/6/13.

> A: No; it is best to root up all plants of the native kind, because the cotton is a very bad kind, and the plants growing on from year to year breed insects and disease.[103]

Favouring one variety over another was not a trivial issue. Exotic cottons introduced by the BCGA were not adapted to African climates, and the bolls they produced demanded additional labour at harvest to keep the lint clean of debris. The burs of the American 'Black Rattler' variety had the unfortunate habit of "lacerating the hands of pickers",[104] but Hutton nonetheless had eighty tons of the seeds sent to West Africa in 1905.[105] An enormous disincentive for farmers was the BCGA's requirement that its exotic cotton seeds be grown as monocrop annuals, disrupting work patterns and complementary ecologies.[106]

In Uganda, peasants were successful – with the aid of the local Department of Agriculture – in resisting BCGA efforts to wipe out the 'Uganda' long-staple varietal. Uganda cotton found a ready market in Lancashire and even commanded a premium over American cottons, commending it to peasant cultivators. Samuel Simpson, Uganda's first director of agriculture, harshly criticised the BCGA for sending Black Rattler and other American seeds to Uganda, and taunted Hutton (who saw Germany as a model for cotton growing) with the fact that "Uganda cotton is having very satisfactory sales in Hamburg and Havre, and the German East Africa Government has given us an order for 60 tons of seed for German East Africa".[107] Simpson further charged that Hutton had maliciously dispatched saw gins to Uganda, complaining that "the work of this Department is being nullified to a great extent".[108] Hutton had ordered that all BCGA ginneries in Uganda be fitted with saw gins, which damaged long-stapled cottons.[109] Simpson's defence of Ugandan cotton was vindicated by the market, and firms in Lancashire praised the cotton as "rather better than Texas".[110] Private ginning firms in competition with the BCGA chose roller gins to protect the long staple, and by 1918 rollers outnumbered saws by four to one.[111]

In the long run, the BCGA was wrong about what kinds of cotton would find a market and pay the grower. Sea Island and other 'superfine' varieties that the BCGA discouraged in the Caribbean succeeded admirably, while Ugandan cotton flourished (exports increased from 54 bales in 1904-05 to 321,348 bales in 1936).[112] Even Hutton was forced to admit by 1917 that there was "a large and growing demand for [long-staple] cotton, which is solely limited by the supply".[113] The BCGA was also wrong about the viability of 'impure' indigenous cottons. Imported American seeds, when they successfully germinated, did not produce good

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[103] T. Dawe, 'A Simple Guide for Peasant Growers on the Cultivation of Cotton in Uganda', Leaflet no. 18, Agricultural Department, July 1908, BCGA 2/2/9.
[104] Frederick Jared Tyler, 'Varieties of American Upland Cotton', *Bureau of Plant Industry* 163, Washington, DC: GPO, 1910, p.35.
[105] Hutton daybook 1, 5 January 1905, BCGA 7/2/1.
[106] Watts (1983), p.195; Bassett (2001), p.33.
[107] S. Simpson to CO, 6 February 1914, BCGA 6/1/3.
[108] Simpson to CO, 28 November 1913, BCGA 6/1/3. Simpson had a personal grudge against the BCGA: at their request, he was pulled from his job as a cotton expert in Egypt and sent to central Africa. Simpson said, "This practically ruined my career, but it has not been allowed to spoil my life which I have tried to make useful." (Simpson to CO, 28 November 1913, BCGA 6/1/3).
[109] BCGA West Africa indents, vol. 2, 52, Manchester Library, M257/2.
[110] Oldham Local Studies, Oldham Master Cotton Spinners' Association letter to members, September 1913, Oldham Local Studies and Archives, OLD2/5/3/2.
[111] Engdahl (1999), p.88.
[112] Jaquay (1997); Sally Herbert Frankel, *Capital investment in Africa*, London: Howard Fertig, 1938, p.274.
[113] James Arthur Hutton, *The Development of the Cotton-Growing Resources of the Empire*, Manchester: BCGA, 1917, pp.15-6.

crops. Lamb "regretted that the old acclimatised variety had been destroyed through measures to extinguish the mixed seed in 1908".[114] Hybrid cottons succeeded only after decades of research that replicated what had already been going on in African fields for centuries.[115]

The Gezira model

Frustrated by the inability of peasant producers to rapidly scale up production and by the abject failure of plantations, Hutton was drawn toward an alternative model of development that combined overt state power with capitalist enterprise. His vision was fulfilled in the Gezira scheme, a massive irrigated plantation in Sudan. The state expropriated land and built infrastructure, while former landowners and new tenants worked leased plots. A commercial syndicate provided high-tech inputs and services – seed, fertilisers, education, tractor ploughing and irrigation – and marketed all the cotton. Although the model was pitched as a harmonious balance between capital, labour and the state, it in effect transformed peasants into sharecroppers entrapped by the cotton economy and laden with new dependencies for farm inputs and credit.

The Sudan Plantation Syndicate's (SPS) experimental plantation at Zeidab was a commercial success, and the government built a preliminary station for the full-scale project at Tayiba on the Blue Nile. Hutton, who was a founding SPS director and major shareholder, visited the site in 1911 and was immediately impressed:

> I can hardly describe what I have found here … We have seen to-day some of the best cultivated cotton fields in the world, and with cotton bursting open which will delight the Lancashire spinner; and all this has been done in spite of immense difficulties in little less than a year … I cannot dwell too much on the fact that many of the tenants have never grown cotton before in their lives, and yet I have never seen cleaner or better cultivation anywhere, and what is more important, the quality of the cotton is really excellent.[116]

As a correspondent told Hutton in 1913, there was:

> no country where a purely peasant proprietary makes a success of things and the only way to make the Sudanese grow cotton is to supervise him as is done at Zeidab and Taieba. And only private enterprise with financial resources can supervise successfully.[117]

Having abandoned peasant agency, Hutton nonetheless clung to paternalism, assuring suspicious colleagues and officials that workers would get "a fair reward", adding that SPS control would save peasants "from the clutches of low class money lenders or unscrupulous buyers" and ensure that "the land is not ruined by reckless methods of cultivation". "Capital," Hutton added, should of course "have a fair reward".[118] After war delays and fears that the government would nationalise the Syndicate, the colonial administration in Sudan embraced

[114] Engdahl (1999), p.161.
[115] Hodge (2007), p.67; Bassett (2001), pp.32-3.
[116] Hutton, Sudan tour diary, 171-2, 1911-12, BCGA 7/3/2.
[117] N. Barton to Hutton, 28 January 1913, BCGA 6/3.
[118] Hutton to Derby, 1 February 1913, BCGA 6/3.

the project with unusual energy. Once in operation, the Syndicate distributed 40 percent of profits to tenants and gave another 40 percent to the state for management of the irrigation works, railways and other infrastructure components.

Victoria Bernal argues that for the colonial state, Gezira was about power as much as it was about cotton: "The colonial order imposed by the schemes was about disciplining a rural population to accept not only the rigors of irrigated cotton production, but also British authority".[119] Gezira combined schools, hospitals and other services with the cotton sector in an effort to create a model society of dependent commodity producers. The plan was praised in the West an example of enlightened colonial development; one visitor beamed that the scheme kept natives "on the land without any suspicion of exploitation".[120]

The SPS was allowed to monopolise the cotton crop on the grounds "that the population at Gezira was too sparse and too inexperienced in dealing with the international market" to manage production and export operations themselves.[121] In reality, the Syndicate wanted absolute control over the economic world in which tenants lived. The BCGA executive council endorsed the SPS precisely because it "would have a lien on the crop through making advances to the tenants", chaining labour to the land through crop liens and loans, eliminating the possibility of competition from indigenous buyers or other rivals.[122] During the cotton boom years of the 1920s, the project was a success. The introduction of cash quickly monetised the barter economy, and consumption of luxuries like coffee, tea and sugar increased, while increases in meat consumption and the use of better building materials marked a general improvement in standards of living among those fortunate enough to get a tenancy in the scheme.[123] Tenants fell into a debt trap, however, and the intensive irrigation of the region created a proliferation of crop pests and human diseases.[124]

Conclusion

The BCGA's attempts to integrate African peasants into the world economy as cotton producers were fraught with contradiction. Its mission was to deliver cheap cotton to Lancashire, but as the merchant John Holt observed, increased cotton growing and lower prices made little sense: "Cheapening will not help that operation. Dearness would be more likely to give the desired result".[125] Having grossly underestimated the prices at which cotton would appeal to African producers, the BCGA tried to get producers to grow more of it, searching for solutions in the intensification of labour and technical means like seeds, ploughs, insecticides and expert supervision.

During the First World War, colonial governments took control over many sectors of the economy, reversing Liberal policies (which had in turn reversed Chamberlain's statist policies after the 1906 election). Hutton warned that "it would be a great mistake if the

[119] Victoria Bernal, 'Cotton and colonial order in Sudan: a social history with emphasis on the Gezira Scheme', in Isaacman & Roberts (1995), p.97.
[120] R. W. Allen, 'Irrigation in the Sudan', *African Affairs* 23:92 (1924), p.258.
[121] R. L. Tignor, 'The Sudanese private sector: an historical overview', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 25:2 (1987), p.190.
[122] BCGA Executive minutes, 24 July 1913, BCGA 1/3/2.
[123] T. Barnett, *The Gezira scheme: an illusion of development*, London: F. Cass, 1977.
[124] William R. Jobin, *Dams and Disease: Ecological Design and Health Impacts of Large Dams, Canals, and Irrigation Systems*, New York: Routledge, 1999, pp.321-55.
[125] John Holt to Morel, 20 June 1902, MP F8/84 219.

business was run by a Government Department",[126] but the BCGA's lackluster record sealed its fate. Political and agricultural officials from the African colonies built a substantial case against the BCGA. Lamb's complaints are illustrative. He charged that BCGA experts:

> are not for the most part highly qualified in agricultural matters … [and] must be prejudiced in favour of cotton and therefore inclined to encourage its growth in localities where other crops might prove far more profitable. … The mistake has constantly been made, with the double result that the natives come to ridicule the agricultural advice which he regards as emanating from the Government, and that the commercial development of the country along sound lines is retarded. … I view these semi-official peripatetic agents of the Association with as much apprehension as would be aroused in the Political staff were an association of lawyers to send their emissaries touring the country advising the Native Administration to reform their methods.

Worst of all, Lamb declared that he "cannot conscientiously recommend [cotton growing] on soils and in localities where other crops would obviously be more profitable to the grower".[127]

Arguments of this sort convinced the imperial government to roll back the BCGA's activities. Hutton resigned in frustration in 1917, and was replaced as chairman by Himbury. The wartime committee on cotton ultimately used a levy on cotton imports and windfall tax surpluses extracted from African and Egyptian cotton producers to fund a much larger, quasi-public organisation, the Empire Cotton Growing Corporation (ECGC). The ECGC was given control over all cotton research and propaganda in the Empire. The BCGA was retained as a utility company to buy and gin colonial cotton. Committed only to commercial tasks, the BCGA eventually became profitable and returned considerable dividends to the thousands of investors who had supported it since 1902.[128]

The real tragedy of the BCGA's 'semi-philanthropic' experiment was not that it failed to grow enough cotton, but that its failures sent the wrong messages to planners of colonial development. Disappointment with the BCGA's approach to peasant production led colonial agricultural officials to even more coercive, state-led models of development. The lesson learnt was not that peasants had good reasons to ignore foreign demands for unprofitable commodities, but that peasants had to be regulated and educated by a powerful state to overcome the perceived social and cultural barriers that commercial enterprise was unable to breach. The myth of the conservative peasant survived, to be tackled again in the 1950-60s by a new generation of development planners with similarly unsuccessful results.

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[126] BCGA Executive minutes, 10 October 1917; 15 November 1917; BCGA 1/3/2.

[127] Lamb, Confidential report, n.d., enclosed in Lugard to Hutton, 27 August 1913, BCGA 6/1/3. Lugard mailed the report straight to Hutton; the BCGA copy is marked in Lugard's hand, "my only copy".

[128] The BCGA's assets were sold to Ralli in 1972, after nationalisation efforts in Nigeria and Malawi. Shareholders were offered 10p. stakes in Ralli or a 100p. buyout (33% over market value) for their 12.5p. BCGA shares. BCGA 5/4.

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3) The impact of agents in the periphery on the establishment and development of commodity networks: as instigators and promoters; through their social, cultural and technological resistance; or through the production of anti-commodities;
4) The impact of commodity circulation both on the periphery, and on the economic, social and cultural life of the metropoles;
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