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AN ANALYSIS OF PRE-COLONIAL CENTRAL AFRICAN AGRICULTURE: EUROCENTRIC VERSUS LIBERAL VERSION

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ABSTRACT

The re-interpretation of the African past is a topical theme in the bourgeoning post-independence African universities. The few educated Africans at independence were more conversant with the history of Europe than the history of Africa or country of their nationality. That was doubtless the reason history was among the first disciplines introduced at the universities founded in post-independence African states. Political independence did stimulate research on national histories in the departments of history. The movement, aimed at recording the events leading to political independence and resolving the incidence of inadequate history teaching material in tertiary institutions, secondary as well as primary schools. Interestingly, accounts by some colonial European scholars described the African past from the perspective of the European experience. Subsequently, emerging African historians were stimulated to re-examine the Eurocentric history in to advance an alternative, more open and unbiased version – liberal interpretation of the African past. The present study encapsulates the controversy between bias and objectivity in reconstructing the African past.

Keywords: *Eurocentric; liberal; pre-colonial; cultivable land; commoner; social-economic differentiation*

INTRODUCTION

This work evaluates L. H Gann's Eurocentric interpretation of pre-colonial agriculture in Central Africa in the nineteenth century. In his book, *A History of Northern Rhodesia*, Gann (1964:6) is of the view that:

> **No commoner could produce much more than his neighbor; neither was there any incentive to engage in more intensive methods of cultivating the soil. The supply of land was unlimited, so there was no much point in thinking of working it; even if a surplus had been produced, there were neither markets nor means of transporting it.**

The study was provoked by the above-mentioned extract. The commoners, or ordinary villagers not privileged individuals or groups, are the core of the discussion. The work draws upon the

historiography of Central African agriculture in analyzing the claims by Gann. The nineteenth century agricultural practices cited are those from Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi.

Plate 1: CENTRAL AFRICA: RHODESIA AND NYASALAND

Source: Google Maps download 17 May 2017

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are twofold, to:

i. Identify Eurocentric elements in E.H. Gann's account of nineteenth century pre-colonial Central African agriculture
ii. Advance an alternative liberal interpretation

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the descriptive and analytical method. The evidence in the analysis was gathered from library books, journals and some oral interviews on pre-colonial Central African agriculture.

ORGANISATION OF THE ANALYSIS

The paper is structured as shown in the table below.

Table I. Research Questions

The Position of E.H. Gann	Research Questions
1.Supply of land was unlimited	Was cultivable land limitless?
2.Backward technology	Was land-use backward?
3.No commoner produced more than his neighbor	Were all residents socially and economically equals?
4.No point in innovative land-use	Were there any incentives for improved land-use?
5.No agrarian markets for agricultural produce	Did agrarian markets exist?

E. H. GANN, BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Gann, a European, held a senior position in the colonial civil service in Northern Rhodesia (now independent Zambia) at the time of writing *A History of Northern Rhodesia* (1964). The British government and the British South African Company (BSA Co) jointly funded the research and publication of *A History of Northern Rhodesia* (Gann, 1964: vi). The position of the British in early1960s was that Central Africa would remain their colony for a thousand years. The book *A History of Northern Rhodesia* was a tool justifying the anticipated prolonged British colonial rule over Central Africa in general and Northern Rhodesia in particular. That explains why Gann, in the book, ostensibly condemns the pre-colonial Central African way of life while his treatment of colonialism borders on lionizing British colonial states in Central Africa. The colonial apologist scholars sharing Gann's interpretation of pre-colonial African agriculture include Wrigley (1969: 3, 254), who described pre-colonial East African agriculture in the following terms:

> **Land was tilled until its yield begun to diminish. It was then abandoned...and new fields were taken. No attempt was made by systematic rotation of crops or the application of manure...the**
> **system was based on the premise that land was not a scarce factor.**

However, more methodical studies of land-use by scholars such as Allan (1949: 9) and Trapnell (1969: 254) in Africa and other scholars elsewhere in the world suggest that, "Only 11 per cent of

the earth's land total is cultivable now or in the immediate future. Allan (1949:10) contended that absolute cultivable land was not more than 33 per cent of the total land surface in 1949. The foregoing land-use estimates drawn from the 20th century indicate that even for modern societies with advanced scientific technology, there are significant practical limitations to the extent land may be cultivable.

CULTIVABLE LAND: PRE-COLONIAL CENTRAL AFRICA

''The supply of land was unlimited,'' E. H. Gann

Cultivable land in nineteenth century Africa was much lower than at present, because of unsophisticated technology, material resources and scarce man power. The axe and the hoe were the major tools for cultivation. Therefore, according to Dixon-Fyle, (1983: 439-10):

i. Heavily wooded land incapable to be cleared by the axe must for our purpose, be classified as uncultivable.
ii. Mountainous areas as well as flat but rocky land should be considered uncultivable.
iii. Tsetse fly infested areas too should be considered uncultivable for all the pastoral peoples in Central Africa like the Ndebele, Illa and Ngoni.
iv. There were some legal limitations on the land a commoner cultivated in centralised states such as the Bemba, Ngoni, Lozi and Ndebele. No villager occupied land and cultivated it indiscriminately without the authority of the chief or king who exercised political, religious as well as judicial powers over the inhabitants in his domain. Cunnison (1959: 211) observed that among the Luapula peoples of Northern Rhodesia the chiefdom was the limit of the area within which a resident was allowed to cultivate. Land encroachment could result in inter-ethnic wars.

We next explore the position of sedimentary communities on the question of accessibility to cultivable land.

AGRICULTURAL LAND AMONG STATELESS SOCIETIES

''The supply of land was unlimited,'' EH Gann

Studies of the stateless Valley Tonga and Plateau Tonga by Margret Colson and Dixon-fyle respectively may lead a cursory observer to concur with Gann that land for agriculture among these people was limitless. Colson (1960: 65) observed that each man had legal rights over the land he cultivated. Virgin land was considered public land. Further, Dixon-Fyle (1983: 432) found that:

> **...there was an abundance of land, and every member of a neighborhood had the right to occupy or abandon a plot whenever he desired. Because land was plentiful, it was neither sold nor inherited and new comers were always welcome as long as they made their intentions known to the *Ulanyika* [owner of the land].**

In this sense, Gann's assumption that agricultural land was unlimited seems credible among the stateless societies. However, the assumption falls short because (Colson, 1960: 65), "...the **most valued alluvium soil** does not cover the whole expanse of Gwembe Valley, the habitat of the Tonga." This most sought alluvial land was *not enough to go round every Tonga household*. Therefore it would be farfetched to assert that agricultural land was unlimited. Though the less fertile land was open to anyone who cleared it first, it demanded a lot of work and was less productive. Furthermore, (Colson, 1960: 65) this factor set limits on the land holding ambitions of individuals and households in cultivating large units.

Further, Dixon-Fyle (1983: 432) cited some limiting factors to the cultivability of land among the Plateau Tonga in the nineteenth century. He noted, "...**heavily wooded areas** of the south-west were **uncultivable** owing to the simple crude axe and labor involved to clear farmland. Stumping was often very hard and this had a **limiting** effect on garden size. The size of gardens was small in poor soils."

- To conclude this segment, it can safely be asserted, therefore, that land for cultivation in pre-colonial Central Africa was limited. It is noteworthy to the observation by Cunnison (1959:211) that chiefdom boundaries were inconsequential for carrying out *other* economic activities such as fishing, gathering or hunting. Thus, villagers could collect fire wood and gather food such as mushrooms and fruits or honey irrespective of chiefdom boundaries. *Gann fails to distinguish between the two broad land-uses in pre-colonial Central Africa: land for cultivation and land for 'other' economic activities.* The land-use for cultivation had legal limitations but the land-use for the other uses was unlimited.

PRE-COLONIAL AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGY

''No attempt was made by systematic rotation of crops or the application of manure…'' EH Gann
''Backward technology,'' Bates (1979:29).

Dr David Livingstone noted that the **Yao** of Central Africa made **use of ridging, fertilisation with ash and the construction of extensive irrigation and drainage** (Birmingham and Martin: 1983: 32).

i. The account by Kjekshus (1977: 29) of the Nkonde peoples on the western shores of Lake Malawi provides most **advanced examples of agricultural technology** in Central Africa. Cattle, sheep and goats played an important role in the Nkonde agricultural system.
   (a) The **beasts were kept penned and the dung was reserved for use as fertiliser**. Sir Harry Johnston and Merensky observed in the 1890s that the Nkonde scattered: ashes and animal dung to fertilise banana fields and garden plots.
   (b) Interestingly, another visitor Elton to the same area in the 1870s noted that: "Hamlets were surrounded by farmland; the appearance of some valleys showing a greater

extension of cultivation than has been reached in our South African colonies (Kjekshus, 1977: 37).

(c) The Nkonde even grew fodder for their beasts. The calculation by Allan was that the pre-colonial traditional agriculture in this part of Central Africa supported up to two hundred people per square mile (Allan, 1969:194).

ii. The Man'ganja of the lower Shire Valley also practiced new ways of working the land. They practiced an agricultural system that best suited their environment. The observations by the Director of Agriculture in 1915 reflected the Man'ganja way of cultivation that had probably stretched back into the previous century. The Agriculture Director's exact words, "...the average results under the native garden cultivated [were] frequently better than in the area of European estates.'' (Morgan, 1953: 464-5)

iii. Developments in other parts of Central Africa show that the African farmer in the nineteenth century evolved various systems to overcome the food insecurity even in areas of poor soils. For example, (Gilman, 1945:37) despite unfavourable soil and climate conditions the Makonde in most years had adequate food and they even managed surplus for sale to their neighbours. They used **ash** to improve the soil fertility and **practiced crop rotation to improve production**. Through their experimentation with their environment, Makonde were able to reduce the period of fallow to only six years (Allan, 1865: 213-16). This was evidence of practical innovation to improve agricultural output.

iv. Siamwiza (2009:1) noted that the Gwembe Tonga demonstrated resilience to live in their semi-arid environment because of their ability to forecast good and bad weather patterns of their environment. The skill enabled them to prepare ahead for contingencies.

v. Barotseland plain agriculture in the nineteenth century demonstrated a number of innovative ways in working the land by the Lozi. Hermite (1973: 119) has provided detailed evidence of how the Lozi **skilfully utilised canals** in their agricultural system.

Canals served several agricultural purposes to:

(a) Reclaim submerged land for agricultural purposes.

(b) Regulate water outflow to maintain proper amount of moisture in the reclaimed land (Hermite, 1973: 92).

(c) Canals eased water transport in the sandy Bulozi Plain.

(d) Other interesting and new techniques used by the Lozi in the nineteenth century to boost agriculture especially under the Litunga Lewanika included the construction of artificial mounds (Vansina, 1979:11).

(d) Fish farming was a common practice, dams were constructed for the purpose.

The preceding evidence contradicts the claim by Gann that Africans in the nineteenth century were poor because of backward technology or because of their incompetence as economic men in the agricultural sector.

- To sum up this segment, contrary to Gann's proposition, Central Africans in the nineteenth century practiced a **variety of innovative agrarian methods** to maintain the fertility of the

soil. Such features were in many areas reinforced by soil conservation practices and occasional irrigation schemes (Kjekshus, 1977: 29).

SOCIAL-ECONOMIC DIFFERENTIATION

‘‘No commoner could produce more than his neighbor,’’ E.H Gann
‘‘Africans had a homogenous and egalitarian economy caused by reciprocity and redistribution,’’ Ackim von Open (1994:5).
‘‘… [socio-economic] disparities in affluence were kept small by social obligations and the system of inheritance ’’ (M. P Miracle, 1960: 37).

Gann suggests that social and economic differentiation among Africans was non-existent; or rather, economic differentiation could best be described as negligible. Proponents of a homogenous and egalitarian economy of pre-colonial Central African society, to which Gann subscribes, see reciprocity and redistribution within kinship groups and preference for investment in social cohesion rather than economic accumulation as strong features of African societies. Sahlins (1973: 119) has suggested a general link between agriculture and social cohesion.

Marxists scholars including Rey and Millasoux (1972:102) are opposed to the above proposition. Instead, they have advanced that:

> **There was increasing emphasis on economic inequality and incipient class formation within pre-colonial African societies which paved way to capitalist penetration. There was internal accumulation and wealth was redistributed between populations of different areas, notably from the interior towards the coast, resulting in an increasing differentiation among trading groups.**

Visitors from literate societies to Central Africa in the nineteenth century left accounts that testify the presence of differentiation. According to Palmer, traveler accounts state agricultural prosperity of **many** though **not all of the region’s peoples** (Palmer, 1977: 223). **Smith** (1983: 209) is more specific in his assessment of the magnitude of **differentiation among the Makonde, Chewa, Shona and Makua pre-colonial 19th century Central African agriculturalists**. He observed that:

> Societies tended to be small-scale and relatively undifferentiated internally where the material base was limited. [However] when surplus [oversupplies] were available large numbers of people tended to congregate in a single political entity which usually distinguished among **different categories of persons**.

Thus, Gann’s wholesale proposition of the absence of economic differentiation among the pre-colonial central African agriculturalists does not hold.
Another feature that demonstrated the presence of differentiation among the commoners under review was their practice of **work-parties**. The parties were not an exclusive of the chief, headman or woman. Some commoners with the economic ability to feed the multitudes who turned up for

food for work did organize work-parties. Every commoner willing to work was invited. Barnes has documented this feature among the Nsenga; Muntemba (1977: 55) among the Lenje and Swaka; Colson (1959: 105) among the Plateau Tonga and so on.

The guests helped in clearing the field, cultivating, weeding and or harvesting. The participants or 'workers', so to say, were rewarded with beer and or a lavish meal. It can firmly be argued that save for the aristocracy, it was the more successful agriculturalists among the commoners who could afford to feed and entertain work-party multitudes. Colson (1959:92) has pointed out that, "...it was the amount of labor available for cultivation as well as the number of fields which ensured prosperity." That meant commoners managed to pool their neighbors' labor and organized workers parties accumulated more than the less resourceful neighbors. Therefore, social-economic disparity did exist and was significant among the pre-colonial Central African commoners.

Miracle's conclusion in his study of the Plateau Tonga concurs with Gann's colonial apologist position. Miracle noted that there was scope for sizeable differences in wealth, depending on one's initiative and luck in inheritance. Like amongst the Plateau Tonga, individuals in most pre-colonial African societies clustered upon a well to do kinsman and lived on his expense for considerable periods. Meanwhile, they obtained loans and gifts from him. Additionally, when a rich relative died relatives shared his wealth and some of his belongings were destroyed as part of the funeral rights. Such practices tended to deter rather than advance continuity of prosperity in the community.

''…there was no much point in thinking of working [the land],'' EH Gann

Vansina (1962:33) contended that trade contact with Mbunda and Chokwe traders in the 16th century spread the cultivation of maize, cassava and other crops from the New World in Central Africa. Formerly, the staple agricultural food crops in the region were varieties of millet supplemented by pusses and cucurbits. By the nineteenth century the new food crops spread to the whole of Central Africa. Roberts (1968:83-4) has described the entrenchment of the new food crops as the most important cultural change affecting Zambia as a whole in the nineteenth century. The new food crops stabilized the source and availability of food. Subsequently, by the nineteenth century the population in Central Africa increased and activated common use of iron tools, such as the hoe and the axe.

We must at this stage consider the hypothesis by Boserup (1965:64) that, "under the pressure of increasing population there is a shift from more extensive to more intensive systems of agricultural land-use under subsistence conditions."[42] Simpler stated, population pressure compelled Central Africans to turn to a more intensive land-use through soil conservation, irrigation systems and fertilization.

i. The obligation of the polygamist to feed the many dependants in his household was an incentive to engage in more intensive methods of working the soil. Further, those villagers capable of organising work-parties became more prosperous than the average commoners.

ii. Trade was another incentive to engage in more intensive agricultural methods. Surplus grain facilitated the agriculturalist to marry several women or organise work parties to accumulate more wealth. According to Roberts (1968:76), there was in Barotseland considerable

exchange of local produce between plain and woodland: fish and basket work for grain and basket work for iron work.

Long distance trade played a significant role in the development of agriculture among the pre-colonial peoples of Central Africa. Trade by the nineteenth century was orderly and contributed to the establishment of the prosperity of kingdoms such as the Lunda of King Mwata Kazembe on the Luapula River.

The position of Eurocentric anthropologists and historians that trade in Africa began only with the export of gold, ivory and slaves is farfetched. Roberts (1970: 716) has rightly pointed out that such exports were only the most glamorous and contends that to most African peoples as elsewhere, the important items of trade were local products which included grain and other agricultural produce.

It was the local agricultural produce that supplied caravan traders with food. (Oliver: 1966, 363-66; 370-73) The local village agriculturalists supplied food to traders since the 15th century when Central Africa was opened up to long-distance trade, to the nineteenth century. The Central African agriculturists obtained European manufactured goods in exchange for their land produce. The acquisition of European manufactured goods was an incentive for the Central Africans to turn to intensive methods of cultivating the soil.

EVIDENCE OF IMPROVED LAND-USE STRATEGIES

According to Smith (1983:47) by the nineteenth century the **Shona** of Central Africa achieved such success in agronomy that their agricultural calendar enabled them **to harvest throughout the year**. (Kjekshus, 1977: 49) Johnstone and Merensky observed in the 1890s that the fertile banana fields and garden plots of the **Nkonde** facilitated **three successive crops of maize, beans and sweet potatoes to be harvested in one year**.

The Gwembe valley Tonga and the **Lozi in the Barotse Plain** practiced **intensive agriculture** in the alluvial soils. Mandala has described how the **Man'ganja** of the **lower Shire Valley** practiced a **dual agricultural system**. The practice increased the chances of survival against the vagaries of drought and floods. It made cultivation an almost year round enterprise (Mandala, 1984:13). Nineteenth century village settlements in the Shire Valley were permanent because shifting cultivation was less common. The crops included maize, cucumbers, pumpkins, tobacco, sugar-cane and beans all implanted in the same garden.

- Many scholars stress that intensive cultivation was a common practice in Central Africa over several centuries leading to the nineteenth century. Some European travelers noted sophisticated agricultural production. The variety of fruits and vegetables narrated by early travelers advocate the widespread practice of intensive agriculture (Prinse, 1978: 210; Smith, 1983:47).

AGRICULTURAL SURPLUS AND AVAILABILITY OF MARKETS

"...even if a surplus had been produced, there were neither markets nor means of transporting it," E.H Gann

‘‘Little or no surplus in pre-colonial Central African agriculture... E. Colson, (1960:92)’’
‘‘No commercial demand for pre-colonial agricultural produce… Dixon-Fyle.’’

‘‘Africans cultivated small fields using backward technology for their immediate needs… Oliver Atmore.’’

Smith and Roberts (1973: 209) maintain the argument expounded in the present paper that significant agricultural surplus were produced in pre-colonial Central Africa. Interestingly, the historiography of pre-colonial agriculture in Central Africa is rather contradictory. For example, a BSA Co official described the Luvale as: “Producing nothing of value....If there is any trade with the outside world, it is very small (von Oppen, 1994: 5).”

Conversely, a Belgian visiting the area about the same period wrote: “...the Luvale lived amidst large and varied agriculture; through their products of cultivation, livestock raising and fishing, supply caravans of black traders from the west who leave a large part of their exchange goods (von Oppen, 1994:7).” Gann and the BSA Co official quoted above were interested parties in the imposition of and perpetuation of British colonial rule in Central Africa. As a result, they were biased against the economic system developed by the indigenous peoples of Central Africa. Undoubtedly, the Belgian’s observations represented the correct situation because he was neutral on the question of the colonization of the region.

The institution of obligatory tribute by commoners to their headmen or women and chiefs was an indicator of surplus. The logic behind tribute was the belief that chiefs or kings had power over the fertility of the land and controlled the economic cycle (Roberts, 1973:169). It was in this context that chiefs in Central Africa exacted levies of grain and beer. Tributary obligations were an incentive for the commoners or subjects to grow more food crops (Prinse, 1978:204).

Another reason for and indicator of agricultural surplus was the need to safeguard against famine in case of natural calamities such as locusts, floods or drought. Such natural calamities were not uncommon in pre-colonial Central Africa. Agrarian surpluses were certain insurance against starvation. Many societies in Central Africa evolved reliable techniques for the safe storage of grain. Palmer has provided an account of how the Ndebele had developed a system of underground granaries in which corn could be preserved for years.

- We have demonstrated above that agricultural surplus was produced in pre-colonial Central Africa. The rest of the discussion is the final thrust examining whether or not markets were available for the surplus produce.

AGRARIAN MARKETS IN PRE-COLONIAL NINETEENTH CENTURY AFRICA

Many scholars are agreed with Gann that markets as a geographically defined place where people meet for the purpose of buying and selling goods were non-existent in Central Africa in the nineteenth century. Thus, Muntemba, Colson, Rotburg and Gibson refute the presence of markets in the region. According to Rotburg, (1965: 582): ‘‘...trade in pre-European times did not bring about the growth of markets. There is no evidence of markets among the Illa, Tonga, Soli, Nsenga, Kunda, Lungu, Bemba, Kaonde, Lamba, Swaka, Lenje, Luvale, Lunda or Luchazi.” However, Rotberg (1965: 104) contradicts himself when he remarks that Africans only occasionally organized markets.

Jan Vansina (1979: 388) is opposed to the view held by the above scholars. He argues that, "...there were market places located close to the borders of the trading place or at the capital of the state." He asserts that, "Sometimes kings or chiefs guaranteed law and order [along trade] market routes and even organized food markets." Trade was significant in the development of flourishing kingdoms such as that of the Lunda of Mwata Kazembe and the Yao states to gain control of not only markets but also trade routes and places of major agricultural production.

Further, it can safely be contended that agricultural produce did have **an intrinsic exchange value.** In this sense, agricultural produce had market *demand*. The produce had market. The produce could be consumed, traded or exchanged for other goods.

The environment and distance did dictate the means of transport used to ferry the agricultural produce to the 'market'. Water transport by canoe near or along lakes and rivers among the Nkonde and Lozi or Aushi. Upland agriculturalists transported their agricultural produce on their heads or shoulders. Beach (1977:44) has cited evidence that among the Shona, Oxen and cows were used in pre-colonial times as beasts of burden. In the case of long-distance trade, evidence is abound. Traders organized caravans to carry goods.

Table II Summary

Nineteenth century Pre-colonial Central African Agriculture

The Position of E.H. Gann	Research Questions	Findings
1. Supply of land was unlimited	Was cultivable land limitless?	Cultivable land was limited
2. Backward technology	Was land-use backward?	Complex innovative land use
3. No commoner produced more than his neighbor	Were residents socially and economically equals?	Social-economic differentiation did exist
4. No point in innovative land use	Were there any incentives for improved land-use?	Incentives did exist for improved land use
5. No agrarian markets for agricultural produce	Did agrarian markets exist?	Agrarian produce had intrinsic market value and physical markets did exist

Finally, this paper contested Gann's Eurocentric propositions on pre-colonial Central African agriculture. We countered that Africans in the nineteenth century did produce agricultural surplus. There were incentives for indigenous agriculturalists to practice intensive cultivation. Land was not limited. Furthermore, the means to transport agricultural produce were available. Even though permanent physical markets may not have existed, occasional markets were organized either at the

palace or chiefdom borders. Trade and commerce flourished, and there was economic differentiation among the residents

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