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<TI>Coffee, Cash, and Consumption

<STI>Rethinking Commodity Production in the Global South

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<AB>This essay reflects on the study of coffee production in Angola, following research in business and missionary archives in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. After observing that African coffee farmers were consumers of foreign goods as much as they were producers for the global market, the essay makes a case for tying histories of consumption into histories of labor and production. It suggests there were long-term continuities as well as changes in African consumption patterns. Finally, it underlines the importance of studying the history of labor and consumption in Africa outside the traditional framework of colonial history, focusing instead on the global dimensions of commodity production.

<KW>Angola, coffee, commodity chains, consumption, textiles

Edwardo Bedi became a teacher for the Baptist Missionary Society in northern Angola in the late 1930s. Like other church members before and after him, Bedi was also a bit of an entrepreneur and skillfully used his own education at the mission for different trades, thus working his way up in colonial society. When coffee cultivation spread all over northern Angola after World War II, Bedi developed a small farm to grow *robusta* beans, which North Americans especially were consuming in ever-larger quantities. By 1960, the investment was paying off so well that he could buy himself a scooter for £75 and sustain his son's reputedly sluggish lifestyle in the Angolan capital, Luanda.¹ While agricultural production in colonial Angola is usually associated with low wages and forced labor, the example of Edwardo Bedi and others like him shows that for some Africans coffee created economic opportunities. In fact, missionary and business records on the coffee trade in Angola highlight a dimension of global commerce often ignored in the study of commodity production in Africa and the Global South generally, namely the role that commercial farmers played as consumers of imported goods.

Angola had been a leading coffee producer on the African continent since the nineteenth century, thanks in no small part to the entrepreneurship of peasant cultivators who added coffee

as a cash-crop to their subsistence economy. Angola was also the African region supplying the most human captives to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade. Because coffee became the country's most successful export crop after the suppression of the slave trade in the 1860s, coffee cultivation in Angola goes to the heart of the historical study of transitions from the slave trade to commodity production in Africa.² Although European merchandise began to flood the Angolan market during this crucial period in the history of western Africa, it is important to recognize that Europe has not always been Angola's main overseas trading partner. Since the opening of oceanic trade in the late fifteenth century, Angola has drawn valuable imports from different sources, not in the least from places in the Global South. In the era of the Atlantic slave trade, Indian textiles dominated imports; many of these textiles were shipped to Angola via Brazil, which also supplied large quantities of locally produced *aguardente* (rum). In the nineteenth century, cheap Manchester cloth undermined the popularity of Asian fabrics in Angola and elsewhere, while Portugal used differential tariffs to promote its domestic textile industry in Angola, making Portuguese products economically attractive to African buyers. But now that the centers of global textile manufacturing and many other consumer goods industries have moved back to the Global South, Angola has strengthened its commercial ties with countries like China, South Korea, South Africa, and again Brazil. In the long term, therefore, the dominance of European manufactures in the Angolan trade was only temporary.

But since the rise of "legitimate" commerce and throughout much of the colonial period, Dutch trading companies were dominant on the coast of Angola. The first was the Afrikaansche Handelsvereniging, which began trading in Angola and the Congo in the 1850s. This Rotterdam firm shipped a range of local products, including coffee, to the Netherlands, although its Angolan branch was shut down when a three-decade-long boom in wild rubber production ended in the

1910s. Then, around 1920, the Zuid-Afrikaansch Handelshuis (Zuid), based in Amsterdam, started operations in Angola, fully focused on the coffee trade. The result of Dutch ascendancy in Angola's postabolition economy was not only that the Netherlands became a prime destination for Angolan robusta exports, but also that Dutch manufacturers found new markets for their products in West Central Africa.³ Indeed, analyzing extant records of Zuid, it becomes clear that coffee cultivation connected Angolan farmers to the global economy in more than one way.

Around 1930, Zuid had agencies in Luanda and Ambriz (a former slave port on Angola's northern coast) which bought up coffee and provided imported goods on credit to small-scale traders in the interior. One employee claimed the company was "the largest coffee exporter [in Angola] before the war."⁴ After World War II, Zuid apparently stopped exporting coffee on its own account and concentrated more on diversifying its import business. It seems that, except for a series of annual reports, the archives of Zuid have not survived the firm's merger with the Curaçao Trading Company (later known as Ceteco) in 1968.⁵ Significantly, however, the annual reports continually describe Angolan farmers not as producers, but rather as consumers whose "purchasing power" depended on annual coffee harvests and the prices their robusta beans reaped in the global market.⁶

This should not be surprising. Anyone studying the operations of trading companies in colonial Africa will recognize the emphasis they placed on domestic consumption.⁷ In the case of Angola, however, the historiography has been so concerned with labor coercion and land expropriation under Portuguese rule (which were both very real) that independent African production and trade has been almost totally ignored. But right up to independence, in 1975, agricultural production remained largely in the hands of African peasants, who made Angola

practically self-sufficient in food crops and a net exporter of maize. In northern Angola, coffee also long remained predominantly a peasant crop.

To understand how Angolans became cash crop producers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, histories of consumption must be tied into those of production. While tax imperatives and state coercion can explain to some degree why Africans labored in the colonial economy, “there was always also, and indeed primarily, a demand for goods.”⁸ Acknowledging the role imported commodities played in the development of colonial economies also means that the expanding literature on consumer cultures in Africa must take a slight “economic turn” and relate more to questions about labor and production.⁹

Secondly, the preponderance of cotton textiles in the import ledgers from Ambriz points to a remarkable continuity in consumer demand in the coastal hinterland from the era of the slave trade to the 1890s and onward.¹⁰ What generally changed because of the nineteenth-century cash crop revolution in Africa was that more people gained access to imported luxury items. How did consumer tastes change over time? It seems that for a long time, Angolan coffee farmers invested their money mainly in traditional goods like textiles and livestock. In 1942, for instance, an Anglican missionary in Uíge observed, “Coffee paid a good price and many benefited by it so much that they bought better wearing apparel and others bought livestock. . . . The men had dressed their wives better too this last dry season.”¹¹ Nonetheless, around 1960, Unilever agents reported on Angola that their soap and butter products began to “reach the bush” via wholesale traders like Robert Hudson, another longtime player in the Angolan coffee market.¹² Around the same time, farmers used the proceeds of their coffee harvest to buy bicycles, scooters, and even American automobiles. Textiles were still the main fashion, but after WWII, Angolan consumer tastes increasingly resembled those of the industrialized world.

Finally, although the growth of Angolan coffee production coincided with an expansion of Portuguese imperial ambitions in that corner of the world, the networks that connected farmers in Angola to consumers and manufacturers elsewhere in the world were global rather than colonial. Portuguese shopkeepers dominated the retail business in Angola, and much of the country's overseas trade passed through Lisbon because of Portugal's protectionist tax regime. But ultimately, most Angolan coffee was roasted in the United States and the Netherlands, and the merchandise retailers exchanged for coffee was manufactured in countries like England, Germany, Japan, and the United States.¹³ More importantly, Angolan farmers had been connected to global manufacturing centers since the mid-nineteenth century, before the advent of colonial rule, or much earlier still if we include the era of the slave trade. Colonialism probably accelerated Angolans' exposure to modern consumer goods, but Angolans were not dependent on European rule to become global consumers.

Some of the most exciting work on African consumption approaches the subject from a global perspective. For instance, Jeremy Prestholdt has analyzed how East African demand for specific foreign textiles influenced the development of cotton manufacturing in cities like Salem and Bombay.¹⁴ Similar connections between African consumers and European industries can be observed in the archives of textile manufacturers in the Netherlands, with whom Zuid placed orders for their Angolan clients. When Zuid started in Angola, the firm immediately approached different manufacturers to produce the fabrics they needed to compete in this market. Around 1920, for instance, Van Heek & Co. in Enschede were asked to produce cotton blankets on behalf of Zuid's agent in Luanda, while in the 1930s, the Luanda office mainly demanded khaki saateen. Some requests were not fulfilled. When Zuid's agent in Luanda brought up the possibility of producing table cloth and cheap khaki drills for the Angolan market, Van Heek replied that

such products “did not fit” their production line, meaning Zuid had to look elsewhere.¹⁵ Indeed, different manufacturers produced different kinds of cloth. In the 1920s, the Koninklijke Stoomweverij (royal steam weaving mills) at Nijverdal, for instance, supplied Casa Zuid with white shirtings, but not much else.¹⁶ Although research on Dutch textile production for the African market has mainly concentrated on the famous and colorful wax prints, this and other evidence suggests that before the war cotton blankets, khaki, and white drills were very much the standard in northern Angola.¹⁷

In short, recent advances in the study of global commodity chains, focusing on the links between producers, middlemen, and world markets, have taken the history of commodity production in the Global South beyond the national framework of colonial history.¹⁸ This essay suggests that a fuller understanding of Africa’s integration in the world economy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be obtained by viewing Africans not just as producers, but also as consumers of goods. If it is impossible to understand the Atlantic slave trade without considering the role that imported goods, especially textiles, played in African societies, then the same could be argued for African production and trade in the postabolition era.

Jelmer Vos is a lecturer in global History at the University of Glasgow. He is the author of *Kongo in the Age of Empire* (2015). His work on slavery, the Atlantic slave trade, and the history of labor in Angola has been published in the *Journal of Family History*, *African Economic History*, and *History in Africa*, among other places.

Notes

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1. David Grenfell, Annual report to former workers. 1960. Regent’s Park College, Angus Library (henceforth AL), BMS, A/44/8b.

2. Law, *From Slave Trade to “Legitimate” Commerce*.

3. Nationaal Archief, NAHV (2.18.10.09), 72/167, Annual Report 1880.
4. Van der Graaf, “My Years in Angola.”
5. The Ceteco archives are housed at the Stadsarchief Amsterdam.
6. International Institute of Social History, IISG ZK 59663, Zuid-Afrikaansch Handelshuis, Annual Reports.
7. For instance, see chapters 3 and 4 of Burke, *Lifebuoy Men*.
8. Ross, et al., “Introduction,” 5.
9. For instance, see chapter 6 of Martin, *Leisure and Society*; chapter 2 of Fair, *Pastime and Politics*; and chapter 2 of Ivaska, *Cultured States*.
10. Portugal, *Relatório do Ministro*, 180–203, 246–51.
11. Cooper to Patterson, Uíge, December 31, 1942. North Angola Mission archives (private collection, henceforth NAM).
12. E. W. Pera, “Visit to Angola.” November 1963. Unilever Archives, UNI/RM/OC/2/2/2/2.
13. Portugal, Repartição Central da Estatística, *Colónia de Angola*.
14. Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*.
15. Historisch Centrum Overijssel, Firma Van Heek & Co te Enschede, 166/1520, August 1938.
16. Ibid., Koninklijke Stoomweverij te Nijverdal, 167.4.1/24 and 167.4.1/810.
17. W. D. Grenfell, San Salvador Station, January 1939. AL, BMS, A/44/8(1); “God’s Enabling.” February 1936. Letter from Joy Peters, Uíge, November 19, 1935. The journal *Textielhistorische Bijdragen* contains several contributions on Dutch wax prints (NAM.)

18. Topik and Clarence-Smith, “Introduction.”

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