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VAN MELKEBEKE, SVEN. *Dissimilar Coffee Frontiers. Mobilizing Labor and Land in the Lake Kivu Region, Congo and Rwanda (1918-1960/62)*. [African History, Vol. 9.] Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2020. xiv, 335 pp. Ill. Maps. € 75.00; \$91.00. (E-book: € 75.00; \$91.00.)

The expansion of African coffee production in the interwar period and the years after World War II is still a neglected episode in African economic and social history. Certainly in the anglophone literature, more attention has gone to colonial crops like cocoa and cotton than to coffee, despite Africa's significant contribution to world coffee production in the twentieth century. From producing very little around the turn of the century, by 1960 Africa produced about a fifth of total global coffee outputs. Generally, small-scale farming was the dominant form of production, and robusta coffee, a heat- and disease-resistant crop, the main product. The endemic presence of coffee leaf rust condemned the cultivation of better-priced arabica coffees to higher and cooler altitudes, where they usually attracted the attention of state-backed European settlers. One such region was Lake Kivu, the focus of *Dissimilar Coffee Frontiers*, Sven Van Melkebeke's welcome addition to the historiography of coffee in Africa.

The book, a minimally revised version of Van Melkebeke's 2017 doctoral dissertation, compares the mobilization of land and labour in eastern Belgian Congo and western Rwanda, two adjacent arabica-growing regions bordering Lake Kivu. Both regions were under Belgian administration, but local circumstances gave rise to different production systems. While in Belgian Congo the colonial state supported the formation of a plantation economy dominated by white settlers, a shortage of available land and the political impossibility of expropriating Africans under mandate rule meant that, in Rwanda, smallholding prevailed. This was the fundamental difference between these two "coffee frontiers", which had profound consequences for local labour relations.

For much of the colonial era, Van Melkebeke tells us, African peasants in the Lake Kivu region had an uncomfortable relationship with coffee, a crop colonials introduced from outside and forced upon them. In the colonial Kivu district, settlers began to invest in the cultivation of arabica trees in the 1920s, obtaining concessions from the colonial state and occasionally purchasing land from African chiefs. Indirectly, state power also played a role in labour recruitment, as land expropriation, tax demands, restrictions on smallholding, limitations on mobility, and the possibility to "repurchase" tributary labour duties pushed African men towards plantation wage labour. Within these colonial constraints, however, workers had some control over the terms of their employment. Van Melkebeke shows that around World War II, most workers sought wage labour "voluntarily" and preferred temporary, informal contracts to long-term employment on European estates – a situation that equally suited the flexible labour demands of coffee planters.

In Rwanda, where settler agriculture was not an option, colonial administrators imposed coffee as a compulsory crop on African smallholders, using missionaries, agronomists, and Tutsi monitors to teach chiefs and sub-chiefs how to grow it. As world coffee prices remained unstable into the 1930s, the whip was often necessary to remind growers of the crop's appeal. Smallholders were therefore not truly independent but, in Van Melkebeke's terminology, "obligatory cultivators" (p. 42). However, chiefs and other notables were able to adapt this system of compulsory coffee production to customary land tenure and labour relations. Most notably, landholders used the precolonial institution of *uburetwa* to force clients to cultivate coffee for them and to demand unpaid corvée labour. Despite its official abolition in 1949, *uburetwa* continued until the end of the colonial period. Subjects often responded by seeking wage labour to repurchase *uburetwa* – a strategy increasingly favoured by the colonial government – or by substituting their own labour with that of family or community members. That was, in a nutshell, how labour relations developed in the coffee lands around Lake Kivu. Van Melkebeke has been able to tell a rich and complex story of colonial regulations, tributary

relationships, and worker responses by unearthing a vast array of provincial, district, territorial, and agricultural reports from Belgian Congo and Rwanda in the African Archives in Brussels. These materials are so voluminous and rich in detail that his decision to focus on “production” – narrowly defined as the mobilization of land and labour – at the expense of themes like cultivation techniques, processing, and trade and research in other archives is understandable. If a critical note must be raised, however, it would be that the book presents a lot of useful evidence of labour relations in coffee production in the Lake Kivu region without clearly articulating a cohesive argument holding the material together. In particular, the book could have reflected more explicitly on the delicate relationship between coercion and freedom, or between oppression and opportunity, in colonial coffee economies, which quietly lingers in the background as the main theme.

What did it mean, for instance, for workers to offer their labour “spontaneously” or “without extra-economic pressure” (p. 153)? The book makes clear that several, often conflicting circumstances conditioned the entry of Congolese and Rwandan workers into the rural labour market. On the one hand, there is little doubt that Africans generally disliked plantation labour, which tended to be low paid and degenerating. On top of that, rural wages declined in real terms during the colonial period, according to Van Melkebeke, making plantation labour even more unattractive. On the other hand, regular wage labour in the plantation sector seems to have become more popular after World War II, as young men from Congo and Rwanda tried to escape customary labour obligations and gain financial independence. At the same time, coffee workers were hardly ever fully detached from their own lands and found alternative sources of income in food production, small-scale trade, and urban migration, putting pressure on plantation owners to improve wages and working conditions.

Or what did “obligatory cultivation” mean when chiefs could exploit colonial impositions through patron-client relationships or even get rich from growing coffee? Although smallholders might initially have resented coffee cultivation, the compulsory element ended in 1938, and many clearly benefited from the opportunities coffee gave them when prices went through the roof after World War II. Van Melkebeke mentions reports of farmers using coffee income to raise their social standing by buying cattle and foreign textiles (p. 229). There is also evidence that living standards in the coffee-growing regions of western Rwanda were higher than elsewhere in the mandate (p. 192). Van Melkebeke notes a similar increase in material welfare among plantation workers in the colonial Kivu district, who were able to spend growing amounts of their wages on consumer goods like clothes, bikes, and sewing machines (pp. 210, 241). Such stories seem to conflict with messages about compulsion and declining real wages and therefore merit more attention than they currently receive.

Such concerns notwithstanding, Van Melkebeke has produced an original and rigorous analysis of two contiguous but differently organised coffee economies in central Africa. The book is mainly a social history, offering readers many detailed insights into the complexities of wage, *corvée*, and tributary labour in two African societies under Belgian colonial rule. For economic and agricultural historians, the main takeaways relate to the book’s fundamental distinction between the settler economy that emerged west of Lake Kivu and the economy of independent smallholders on the eastern side of the lake. The book shoots off warnings about poorly paid plantation work and reminds the reader of the economic advantages of smallholding. But instead of viewing these two different production systems in opposition to one another, as scholars often do, Van Melkebeke has created a picture of historical interconnectedness, perhaps unique to the Lake Kivu region, where workers sought plantation labour to redeem themselves from obligations to powerful chiefs or to become independent smallholders themselves.

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