

that is pity, but it should be emphasized that this in no way detracts from the value of his study.

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Sven Van Melkebeke, *Dissimilar Coffee Frontiers. Mobilizing Labor and Land in the Lake Kivu Region, Congo and Rwanda (1918-1960/62)* (Leiden: Brill, 2020). 335 p. ISBN 9789004428157.

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In this book, Sven Van Melkebeke investigates the development of coffee production around Lake Kivu in the period between 1918 and 1962. The book contains a large body of newly unearthed and analysed quantitative and qualitative materials that are properly contextualized. Van Melkebeke handles his materials conscientiously and knows what can and can't be done on the basis of the evidence he has, and he is always careful to point out potential limitations of a source. On the basis of his wide-ranging data, Van Melkebeke argued that the development of coffee production differed radically between the eastern and western sides of the lake and that this was the result of precolonial and demographic local differences that were institutionalized during colonial rule, in addition to the complicated interrelations across a flurry of actors in both regions. The introductory chapter lays out the historiographical and theoretical background of the book, discusses the geographical and temporal scope and introduces the sources. Most interesting is perhaps the sketch of the various pre-colonial communities in the Lake Kivu region and how they had evolved and diversified over time at the end of this introduction.

In the first chapter, Van Melkebeke exploits a large amount of quantitative archival materials to make clear that in the Congolese side of Lake Kivu, the rise of coffee production was largely driven by European plantation agriculture, whereas in Ruanda-Urundi African smallholders were mainly responsible for the increase of production from the mid-1930s. Concomitant with this was the focus on *robusta* in the Congo, while the smallholders in Ruanda-Urundi solely cultivated *arabica*. The latter is the more vulnerable, but also more valuable, of the two coffee varieties. Unfortunately missing from this chapter are some quantitative estimates of the population in these two regions (and the sub-dis-

tricts within them). To contextualize coffee cultivation and assess the outside options, an overview of other economic activities in the two areas would have been beneficial here as well. In Chapter 2, Van Melkebeke attempts to explain these divergent trajectories. A wide range of potential explanatory factors (environmental, economic, political) are discussed, but Van Melkebeke favours an explanation that takes into account the combined effects of differences in land availability and variations in the pre-colonial land tenure systems which made it more difficult to alienate land (for plantation agriculture) in Ruanda-Urundi.

In Chapter 3, Van Melkebeke digs deeper in the dynamics pertaining to the land used for coffee production. He neatly lays out how the combination of customary land systems and colonial land policy created a dual land tenure system in which both customary rights to land and private ownership coexisted. This also gave rise to disputes over land in both areas. Chapter 4 goes on to discuss how labour was mobilized for coffee cultivation. Van Melkebeke notes that workers came to work on plantations in three ways; freely, out of their own initiative; via local chiefs, or through direct colonial government intervention. As was often done in colonial Africa, and also in the Lake Kivu region, the colonial government imposed taxes and commodified customary tributes in efforts to raise the amount of labour available on the market through increasing the need for cash among the population. Chapter 5 zooms in on the plantation workers. It is clear that in both Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, work on plantations was generally done by temporary workers. It seems that the purchasing power of their wages declined over time and that these workers were generally treated harshly. Smallholders fared somewhat better as their incomes from coffee cultivation likely remained stagnant or increased. Yet even smallholders were subjected to control and rigid rules over the various steps in the production process. Not complying with certain rules (e.g., regarding the use of manure or the frequency of picking during the harvest) could result in fines or even physical violence and imprisonment. In the final substantive chapter to issue of how and to what extent Africans resisted and/or adapted to the colonial coffee economy is investigated. Large scale violence, though not entirely absent, was not widespread. Instead, more common means of resistance was through migration, desertion of the work place, smuggling and illegal selling of coffee, or by destroying the crops. At the same time, it is also clear that many Congolese and Rwandans tried to benefit from some of the opportunities created by the increased amount of cash and goods into the area.

In general, this book is a worthy addition to a growing body of literature on the history of commodity production across the globe. I do have a few quibbles. The methodological section of the introduction is only about sources. This is a missed opportunity, because the book uses the comparative methodology exceptionally well and this section could have easily laid out the benefits and drawbacks of that approach. Additionally, it could have emphasized the benefits of combining quantitative and qualitative evidence to sketch a detailed picture of the development of coffee and its consequence across these different regions. In the theoretical framework, it is suggested that the book will contribute to the debates about commodity frontiers and empire. While the concept of commodity frontiers is well defined here, it remains unclear what the 'debates' are about; what are the sources of disagreement; what are the different positions; what has caused the lack of consensus; and how will this book attempt to resolve this? The reader remains ignorant of such issues. Moreover, it is curious that a book concerned with rising production of coffee for the market in colonial Africa makes little use of economic theory. For example, the work of the late Nobel laureate W.A. Lewis, who wrote precisely about the same issues as Van Melkebeke, is entirely absent from the book. Van Melkebeke only superficially engages with the now huge literature on the effects of colonial institutions for development.

These caveats notwithstanding, this book represents an important achievement and exemplar study of the development of tropical cash crop production at the meso-level. The idea to compare these two regions that are in many ways similar, but differ in crucial aspects to drive diverging outcomes, is great. It is hoped that the study will inspire new comparative work on other commodities and/or subnational regions across the Global South.

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