

Elijah Doro

Plunder for Profit: A Socio-environmental History of Tobacco Farming in Southern Rhodesia and Zimbabwe

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023

ISBN 9781009093071 (PB) £85.00. xvi + 316 pp.

Tobacco is Zimbabwe's second largest foreign currency earner after gold and provides a livelihood for many smallholder farmers. However, it is responsible for deforestation, land degradation, air and water pollution, and exposes workers, often children, to pesticide poisoning. Indirectly, it also encourages widespread smoking. Elijah Doro embodies this contrasting reality, having grown tobacco himself for six years, and had his school fees paid with his parents' tobacco income. He has now bravely written an impassioned book on the need for new agricultural systems, capable of phasing out tobacco in Zimbabwe.

Plunder for Profit is a socio-environmental history that explores how the relationship between tobacco farmers and the environment 'shaped socio-economic and political landscapes, physical environments, agrarian ecosystems, and even impacted on the human body' (p. 12). It is largely based on sources from the National Archives of Zimbabwe, although a few oral interviews and the author's personal experience also play a role in the final chapter. Although I have some minor reservations, especially about its organisation and the sometimes too uncritical use of some sources, I think this important book has at least three merits: it refines and integrates existing historiographies, it resists teleological accounts of environmental history, and it combines all this with a passionate civic engagement.

The book takes 'a longue durée approach' to help 'shape economic choices and policies [...] during a time of volatile climate, ecological and social uncertainty' (p. 11). The first of the six chapters therefore begins with the first British pioneer tobacco settlements in 1893, three years after the establishment of the colony of Southern Rhodesia. Doro's choice is understandable, as colonisation was undoubtedly a rupture, but it is also a missed opportunity. Tobacco has been grown in Southern Rhodesia since the fifteenth century, and Doro mentions in passing that the Shangwe people 'had a thriving tobacco industry that the colonialists found and later undermined' (p. 41). Nevertheless, the reader is left with no information about the socioenvironmental dynamics that characterised precolonial tobacco cultivation, which would have provided a more thorough understanding of the innovations brought about by British tobacco farming.

Tobacco cultivation, as Doro reconstructs throughout the chapter, was then based on the exploitation of both the environment and people. Forests were replaced by tobacco, and the influx of new settlers led to further soil depletion. On the other hand, tobacco farming was affected by perennial shortage

REVIEWS

of African labour, and recruitment methods included kidnapping and coercion. While women and girls were rarely employed in the sector, farmers relied heavily on children, who were cheap and considered better at grading and stringing tobacco than adults. However, Doro's decision to deal with Africans only in their role as labourers leaves the reader wondering how exactly land was appropriated from indigenous groups. Only later, and too briefly, does Doro mention that 'the racist land segregation policies' led to Africans occupying the drier parts of the country (p. 187). A fuller account of this aspect would have strengthened the book by showing how the 'plunder' also involved cultivated land. Too little is said about indigenous agriculture and its ecology. This aspect only comes up in relation to tobacco cultivation, and then only in chapter four – a decision that perhaps leaves the African actors out of the story for too long.

The second chapter deals with the tobacco boom in the colony after the end of the Second World War. It is an important contribution to the debate on colonial conservation in southern Africa. Doro proposes a third way between environmental declension narratives, which have so far failed to acknowledge the role of white tobacco farmers in conservation, and progressive conservation discourses, which on the contrary have been embedded in optimism. He invites us to see 'environmental change as a non-linear process' (p. 105) and shows 'how positive and progressive conservation attitudes were also spontaneously and simultaneously generated by the tobacco boom' (p. 94). Extensive farming became increasingly unprofitable, and so what Doro often refers to, somewhat opaquely, as 'the dynamic of capital' led the farmers to care about conservation issues.

However, in this attempt to critique the declension reading, the author sometimes seems to follow the sources uncritically. The assertion that the Southern Rhodesia's tobacco representative in London in 1949 'more aptly captured' the 'healthy change in appearance of the farms' than historian of Zimbabwe Ian Phimister (p. 115) at least calls for more caution. If the shift towards more intensive and diversified farming can be judged as positive, this does not mean that the introduction of livestock, the construction of 'many new dams, and many contour ridges' and the afforestation with 'exotic Eucalyptus trees' (pp. 115–116) – not to mention the extensive use of pesticides – did not cause other environmental problems.

The third chapter, which illustrates the use of pesticides in tobacco farming in Southern Rhodesia from 1945 to 1980 'and their effects on the human body, the body politic and the natural environment' (p. 133), is the most valuable in the book. It is a successful attempt to begin to fill the historiographical gap on pesticides in Africa – historiography has indeed focused on the Global North, while, as Doro notes, '99 per cent of deaths due to pesticide use occur in the Global South!' (p. 125). The author also analyses the dynamics set in motion by the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). In the 1960s, the

REVIEWS

Southern Rhodesian Tobacco Advisory Committee urged the government to regulate pesticide control to provide assurances to overseas buyers, rather than out of concern for environmental contamination or human poisoning. Doro thus addresses 'the dichotomy between the environmentalism of affluent societies and the environmentalism of poor and less developed polities', which 'was usually a mere smokescreen to comply symbolically with global norms largely for the purposes of national economic interests rather than genuine environmentalism' (p. 143). Moreover, Doro does a commendable job of finding in the sources the 'silent and silenced casualties' (p. 162), i.e. the poisoning deaths of African workers and animals.

The African peasantry finally enters the narrative in chapter four. Covering a rather long chronology (1900–1980), it shows how African farmers went from benefiting from rising demand to being gradually excluded from the market after the Great Depression. This exclusion continued until the 1950s, when the colonial state began to support African production, but relegated it to the production of Turkish tobacco, which did not challenge European tobacco farmers. Eventually, the economic results were marginal and African enterprises collapsed due to the sanctions imposed by the United Kingdom on Rhodesia in 1966 in response to the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) of 11 November 1965.

The fifth chapter is concerned with the environmental impact of tobacco farming after the UDI. The embargo imposed by the British government forced tobacco farmers to diversify into wheat and cotton. To compensate for the loss of income from tobacco production, farmers were forced to grow crops well beyond the land's capacity. Eventually, the Rhodesian Bush War and the worsening economic crisis in the mid-1970s led to the abandonment of farms. Once again showing how a simple declension narrative does not deliver a full picture of what was going on in the tobacco farms, Doro argues that from the late 1970s diversification bore some fruit. Agriculture increasingly met domestic needs, while campaigns for alternative fuel sources, such as coal, helped to save some of the remaining forests.

The final chapter looks at debates about smoking and public health in colonial Southern Rhodesia and postcolonial Zimbabwe. While in the Global North these debates have focused on public health since the 1950s, in Southern Rhodesia they have been dominated by tobacco interests. It was not until the 1990s that the first measures to protect non-smokers were introduced in Zimbabwe. Moreover, the chapter deals with the transformations brought about by the Fast-Track Land Reform Program in 2000, which transferred over 10 million hectares of land from white commercial farmers to 146,000 previously landless black farmers. Contract farming became widespread, with overexploited smallholders suffering from unfair pricing and high interest rates on loans. There was also a shift from wage labour to family and informal labour, with more than 50 per cent of tobacco smallholders employing children

REVIEWS

under the age of eighteen. Alongside this grim social reality, in which violence, although deracialised, was still very much present, the land reform escalated deforestation and encouraged the uncontrolled use of fertilisers and chemicals. Doro describes the changes he has witnessed in what, 23 years ago, ‘was once a scenic landscape’: today ‘it is just a muddy puddle stripped of all beauty, the birds’ nests are gone, the fish disappeared and the trees around it cut down for curing fuel’ (p. 253).

In short, tobacco generates profits for the state and big companies, but not for the well-being of farmers. Quite the opposite: tobacco is trapping Zimbabweans in a vicious circle, costing public health services, driving farmers deeper into debt and irreversibly destroying the environment. Doro succeeds in making this plunder visible, taking on the role of environmental historian as a discloser of hidden violence. He also ambitiously links the development of Zimbabwean tobacco production to the global history of tobacco and to events specifically related to the Global North, such as the Great Depression and the rise of environmentalism. This will allow the monograph to appeal to a wide range of scholars.

GIOVANNI TONOLO
European University Institute
Giovanni.Tonolo@eui.eu