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“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

Traditional Agricultural Knowledge vs. Modernity. Changing Cultivation Practices and Generational Conflict in Northern Togo

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Abstract

For a long time African agricultural practices were considered by European agronomists as irrational and ecologically unfavourable. From the 1970s, a revaluation took place and African cultivation methods were recognised as agricultural knowledge. At this time the “traditional” agricultural practices, however, were increasingly replaced by new cultivation techniques as the ox plow introduced by development projects. The evaluation of these changes by agronomists oscillated between the praise for a successful agricultural modernisation, the concern about the ecological impacts of the innovations and the incomprehension of the decline of “traditional” knowledge.

In northern Togo this agricultural change accelerated during the 1990s under the influence of the expansion of cotton cropping: Ox plows were widely disseminated, the use of chemical fertiliser rose sharply, hybrid maize replaced partially traditional millet and sorghum varieties and the wooded park land has been thinned.

This paper argues that these changes must be regarded in the context of a generational conflict and the quest of modernity of the young men: By a successful revolt against the authority of the elders many young men obtained economic independence and were now able to make their own agricultural decisions. Therefore, they aimed to distinguish themselves from the elders by the expansion of cotton and maize cropping and new cultivation practices which they regarded as modern such as the ox plow and the use of chemical fertilisers. The young men neglected the questions of the ecological impacts of the new cultivation and sustainability in favour of short term high incomes and social prestige replaced. “Traditional” local knowledge fitted no longer with their aspirations. The elders regarded the new cultivation practices as harmful but were unable to convince the young men to readjust their agricultural methods.

Keywords: Agricultural change, generational conflict, quest of modernity, Togo, traditional knowledge