

Land Tenure and the Commercialization of Agriculture

By E. H. WHETHAM

THE historians of land tenure in medieval Europe might find much to interest them, and possibly some illumination on their problems, in the changes that are now taking place in land tenure in many parts of Africa. Of the two books here reviewed,¹ the first, edited by Prof. Biebuyck, contains 21 papers read at a conference at the University of Lovanium (Congo) in 1960; each paper, either in French or English, has a summary in the other language. The title might lead the English reader to suppose the book is about cropping systems, but the papers are in fact concerned with land tenure in Africa south of the Sahara, while Miss Polly Hill's book describes the extensive transactions in land for cocoa plantations which occurred in Ghana from the 1890's onward. Africa south of the Sahara contains vast zones each having much the same soil type, topography, and climate throughout its extent; within these zones the different peoples have evolved an astonishing variety of relationships to their land. Those relationships have in some respects conditioned the response of men to the influences of commercialization and of population pressure, which in turn are now affecting in various ways the adjustment of mental attitudes and social customs to the changes of the twentieth century.

In the symposium, a brief but important paper by Paul Bohannan (pp. 101-15) distinguishes between the modern European concept of a piece of land which can be owned, bought, and sold; and the concept held by many Africans of the 'right to share' the resources of a vaguely defined territory, in ac-

cordance with size of family or in accordance with inherited or acquired status. The 'right to share' normally implies the exclusive use of the produce of any plot of land personally cultivated, and this right often continues for as long as fallow land retains signs of previous cultivation; there are also rights to gather firewood and wild produce and to graze animals over uncultivated land. These rights derive from inheritance through one or both parents, or from grandparents, or through older brothers and sisters; a migrant family can be 'adopted' into another village but normally no family can live within one community and exercise rights to share in the produce derived from the territory of another, except within a strictly limited range of kinship.

The lack of manure and of plough beasts, the desiccation of the soil during the dry season, and shallow cultivation by the hoe have implied the frequent shift of the cultivated land within the effective territory of each unit, though there may be continuous cultivation of river valleys and other favourable sites. Some villages have frequently moved, either because the local spirits failed to provide adequate harvests or because the distance from huts to farmed plots became inconveniently large. Among the Tiv, according to Bohannan, "the position of a man's farm varies from one season to the next, but his juxtaposition with his agnatic kinsmen, and his rights to a farm, do not change" (p. 106). And this concept of a 'right to share', detached from any specific piece of land, is carried to the extreme among the pastoral

¹ D. Biebuyck (ed.), *African Agrarian Systems*, Oxford Univ. Press for International African Institute. xiv + 408 pp. 1963. Price 47s. Polly Hill, *Migrant Cocoa Farmers*. Camb. Univ. Press. xvi + 266 pp. Price 55s.

Fulani and the Masai, who graze their herds over hundreds of miles of savannah in accordance with the seasonal changes in grazing and the periodic ravages of drought and flood.

Concepts of land tenure are complicated in some areas by territorially overlapping 'rights', based on the earlier conquest of one tribe by another. Services or payments in cash or kind may be extracted from the conquered villages; their inhabitants may be forbidden to gather wild produce or to hunt in the forests but still be allowed to cultivate their land in accordance with their own customs (pp. 116-36 and 157-72, dealing with the Toucouleur in Senegal and the Luunda in the Congo). But in almost all areas, the person (or family) who for the time being has the right to farm any given portion of land does so partly in his own interest and partly in the interests of his lineage from whom he inherited his 'right to share', and to whom it will revert on his death, in accordance with complicated and varied customs.

The maximum area cultivated by a family at any one time has been limited by what could be planted and weeded by hand labour in the rainy season. A certain area of cocoa and coffee could be added, since, once established, the trees yielded an annual harvest with little labour. Cotton and groundnuts, however, could only be cultivated in addition to the food crops if extra labour was available. In some areas, the men who no longer hunted and made war turned their energies to these new pursuits; elsewhere, as in Buganda, immigrants from less fertile soils have been employed on cash crops, in return for the right to occupy a piece of land for the production of their own food.

Over much of Africa south of the Sahara there is still land available for adult men to establish their families on traditional lines. Land therefore has no price, though a stranger wishing to farm within the territory of a community not his own will be expected to pay for this privilege; he will render a goat or a chicken or a sum of money in acknowledgement of the 'superiority' (to use a Scottish term) of the community. When, in

the early years of this century, Ghanaian farmers on the crowded ridge to the east of the River Densu began to establish cocoa plantations on the empty western bank, the community 'owning' that territory enquired if "they had come to buy the land outright, or would they hire the land and then give a third share of the cultivation to the owner of the land? Or did they wish to take the land and plant the cocoa till it began to yield and have the farm split into two between themselves and the owner of the land? Or finally would they prefer to hire farms?" (Hill, p. 35, quoting Opoku). The land was mainly bought on instalments which were paid to the chiefs of the land-selling villages as representing the collective 'owner'; henceforth, it came under the customs of the buyers and within the orbit of inheritance by their kinship.

The pattern of these new settlements was influenced partly by geography but mainly, it seems, by methods of joint purchase and operation derived from matrilinear or patrilinear inheritance. For reasons which are not clear, matrilinear inheritance led to settlement in blocks, from which compact plots emerged as cousins and sisters' sons were accommodated with land. Villages with patrilinear inheritance cleared the forest from a base line forward in long strips which were later divided longitudinally between sons, or to which another strip was added by the second generation beyond the end of the first strip. The maps given by Miss Hill of these strip holdings as they have developed over fifty years reproduce the pattern of 'open-field' farming, yet in a totally different environment from the north European plain. It should also be noted that these tree crops implied the extension in time of the 'planter's' right to the harvest, subject only to the right of his kin to share that harvest during his life and after his death; the 'superiority' of the community over the planted land was pushed into abeyance by the long life of these crops during which the rights of individual families were dominant.

But in many parts of Africa the population has reached or exceeded that density which is

consistent with the maintenance of soil fertility in arid land cultivated by hoe with a bush fallow. The symposium indicates that this danger point has been reached in northern Nigeria round Kano (p. 71); among the Xhosa and Nyakyusa of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa (pp. 374-92); and among the Chewa and Ngoni in northern Rhodesia (p. 371), to quote only three cases. Erosion, deterioration in soil structure, and falling yields under ordinary farming may reduce the value of the traditional 'right to share' until it no longer supplies subsistence. The expedients adopted by such communities to meet this threat are indeed varied, as were, no doubt, those of medieval communities in western Europe in similar circumstances.

Migration of individuals, families, or whole communities is an obvious response to falling yields in the home district, and no doubt it has been in the past the ultimate cause of many local wars. In modern Africa, migration is impeded by the distinctive customs and languages of quite small units, and also by the growing awareness of potential land shortage in many villages which no longer welcome immigrants (p. 65). But young men from the overcrowded areas often seek temporary or periodic employment in the Rhodesian mines, in towns, or in areas of intensive farming such as Buganda, in order to earn the income that cannot be supplied from the resources of their own villages (pp. 193-98). Such selective migration has notoriously evil effects both on the efficiency of local farming in the villages whence the young men set out, and on the social structure of the areas to which they go. (This expedient was, of course, a feature of the Irish economy and of the Scottish Highlands throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.) A number of governments have attempted to organize the migration of communities into new settlements on uncultivated land, with varying results (pp. 233-41; 149-42). One such scheme, at Shendam in central Nigeria for people from the overcrowded Plateau, has evolved a mixture of strip farming in blocks

under controlled rotations of crops and fallow which closely resembles, again, the pattern of 'open-field' farming (p. 75).

A second expedient is the emergence of a pricing system for land, which carries the implication that those who cannot afford the price must seek other employment or employment in other areas. The emergence of rents and the exchange of land against money shows first in dealings with strangers (p. 370). Conflicts then develop between family heads who may grant plots on a 'lease for life' or on outright sale to strangers in return for labour or for cash, and the expectations of members of the lineage to the free use of whatever land they may eventually want within the territory of their community (p. 255). The concept of price also emerges naturally when land is acquired specifically for the production of cash crops, which can furnish the annual rent, or the purchase price, as well as the ability to acquire food from other sources. The commercially minded Baganda have freely bought and sold land for some decades, at prices which increasingly reflect a 'scarcity value' for the production of the profitable coffee or cotton. The official protection here given to the occupation of land by the customary tenants at controlled rents has only encouraged the renting or sale of 'free' lands to immigrants from other areas (pp. 267-80).

A third response lies in the improved farming which enables a given area of land to yield more per acre. The integration of livestock into the crop economy has not, so far, been generally feasible in Africa, partly because of tsetse fly, partly because water is scarce in the dry season, partly because the hoe cultivation of 2-5 acres per family does not support both humans and large animals. Yet the Chagga, on the moist slopes of Kilimanjaro and surrounded by cattle-hungry Masai, have successfully combined the growing of maize, coffee, and bananas with the feeding of cattle stalled beside their huts, on the 'zero-grazing' principle. The 'mixed farming' scheme of the Northern Region of Nigeria still only includes a few thousand farmers whose operations re-

quire continuous financial support and technical advice; the twenty acres or so required to support a pair of working bullocks as well as a family imply the possession of land and of capital in units outside the range of most families in densely populated areas (p. 70). Meanwhile, a system of intensive crop farming has developed in the last thirty years round Kano, based on a large market for foods, fairly good water supplies, and the use of manure from the town. Farmers here have learnt to dispense with a bush fallow; they cultivate a continuous succession of inter-mixed crops of grain and vegetables which takes account of subtle differences in soil and the varying onset of the rains (p. 76). A large trade in foods has also developed in the densely populated Eastern Region of Nigeria, based on a similar system of continuous cropping and manuring; and round Entebbe and Kampala in Buganda. Where climate and soils are not too unfavourable, the African farmers have adapted their cropping and land tenure practices with remarkable speed to take advantage of economic opportunities, but farmers in the arid and semi-arid regions are more strictly bound by their climate to traditional methods.

These intensive types of farming, whether of annual crops or of tree crops, generally weaken the community's 'superiority' over the land, and strengthen the rights of the

small family to perpetual occupation of the same pieces of land, on which they have planted trees or expended donkey-loads of manure. This trend towards 'ownership' in the modern European sense has been marked among the Baganda; among the Yoruba of Dahomey (p. 313); among the Meru in Kenya (p. 228); among the Beta and Dida of the Ivory Coast (p. 250); as well as among the farmers of the Kano province (p. 77). On the other hand, overcrowding among the Xhosa and the employment elsewhere of many of their young men has strengthened the sense of 'ownership' by the community and its responsibility to provide some land for every family, irrespective of efficient farming (p. 383. A parallel could be found among the Irish and Welsh peasantry in the first half of the nineteenth century, when overcrowding led to boycotts and arson against the families that aggregated farms in order to adopt improved methods of cultivation). Throughout Africa south of the Sahara conflicts have developed between profitable farming and the creation of a landless class, between aggregation of land in efficient units on the one hand and subdivision and equality on the other, between overcrowding on the land and employment in congested towns—the same conflicts that provide the subject-matter for innumerable studies in the medieval history of western Europe.

NOTES AND COMMENTS (*continued from p. 124*)

in 1953. He also announced with regret the impending resignation of Professor Finberg who had edited the *Agricultural History Review* from its first number. The Assistant Editor, Dr Joan Thirsk, was appointed Editor as from September 1964. Membership of the Society had risen from 645 to 678. The Treasurer reported that the financial position of the Society was satisfactory.

At a meeting of the executive committee held later in the day, Dr W. H. Chaloner was elected chairman. It was agreed that the 1965 conference should be held at Keele and that Dublin should be considered for 1966.

FUTURE CONFERENCES

The December conference of the Society will be held jointly with the Association of Agriculture at the London School of Economics on Saturday, 5 December. The annual general meeting and conference will be held at Keele Hall, University of Keele, from tea-time on Wednesday 7 April to lunch time on Friday 9 April 1965.

The International Congress of Economic History will take place in Munich from 23 to 27 August 1965 followed by the Twelfth International Historical Congress in Vienna from 29 August to 2 September 1965.