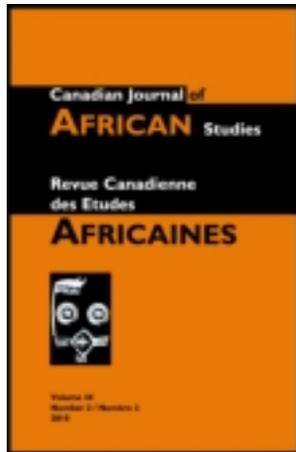


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### Crisis and neoliberal reforms in Africa: civil society and agro-industry in Anglophone Cameroon's plantation economy

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analysis, also for the study of urban planning history in other parts of Africa during the colonial period.

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**Crisis and neoliberal reforms in Africa: civil society and agro-industry in Anglophone Cameroon's plantation economy**, by Piet Konings, Bamenda, Langaa RPCIG, 2011, xiii + 262 pp.

Konings presents a well-written history of civil society and the Anglophone Cameroonian plantation sector in his book *Crisis and Neoliberal Reforms in Africa*, published in 2011 by the Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group (RPCIG) in Bamenda, Cameroon. Langaa RPCIG is unique publishing initiative with a strong focus on Cameroonian and African scholarship and creative writing. It is a non-profit, peer-reviewed publishing group supported by its founding members, contributors, financial grants and various university-based African studies centres that seek to strengthen African research and publishing.

Konings' work contributes to this initiative by providing a much needed update to the literature on the plantation economy in Central Africa. Konings has spent well over two decades researching Cameroon's Anglophone region conducting archival research, interviews and observations. *Crisis and Neoliberal Reforms in Africa* is an empirical case study that exposes the problems and progress of government reforms, the entry and exit of firms, and workers' responses to these changes. As many new foreign firms are currently seeking to enter and to expand Cameroon's plantation sector, Konings' history is timely. The country's plantation economy is in an increasing state of crisis as private actors seek ever-larger amounts of land, and the responses of the underpaid labour force to sectoral challenges have become increasingly unpredictable. This book is a reference for researchers seeking a detailed historical description of land, labour and resistance in the country's plantation economy.

*Crisis and Neoliberal Reforms in Africa* is published at a time when African reliance on imported foods and on agro-commodity exports has been subject to increasing criticism. Cutting through the status quo, Konings' work tells an authoritative story about the limitations of monocropping while also exhaustively detailing the benefits of economic diversification. Through focusing on an array of plantation crops, including palm oil, rubber, tea and bananas, he recounts numerous instructive land and labour disputes. Konings' narrative is an important work that researchers focusing on the agriculture and agro-industrial sectors, land grabbing and labour issues as they relate to export crops should feel compelled to engage with. His book could also help to inform many new studies of dynamic present-day food security challenges in Cameroon.

Of particular note, Konings' political economy story details the problems and progress of a Cameroonian subsidiary of a multinational company, the rise and fall of the state-run Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), and the travails of Cameroon's tea estate. To do so he employs literature from 1960s to the 1990s on plantation economies, and more

recent literature on African labour and civil societies. Visibly omitted from his review is the Caribbean plantation literature, which might have helped to drive his analysis forward.

The book focuses on the actions of civil society groups linked to labour and land when privatization of the plantation sector was coming to a head. Konings found that these actors make up a specifically African style of civil society that is not only created by the place, but also largely shapes the place, the region, and the country. The actions of the individuals and groups in his study enable the continued, albeit limited, functioning of the corporate entities while also crafting their own political and economic identities. Konings asserts that his contribution builds on Marx's concept of the "hidden abodes of [capitalist] production". His analysis focuses on the subordination of labour to the authority of management by documenting the various forms of resistance that emerge from the process of subordination at times of crisis and change. To accomplish this, Konings describes how the terms of the labour contracts and land agreements are negotiated, transcribed, resisted and transformed.

The book consists of eight essays organized in chapters. The first chapter characterizes Anglophone Cameroon's civil society, the agro-industrial crisis and subsequent reforms. This chapter also outlines the theories that inform the overall study on plantation agriculture. The second chapter assesses the role of ethno-regional groups in Cameroon's South West Province and the agro-industrial crisis. The third and fourth chapters characterize the role of workers and of trade unions during the crisis. The fifth and sixth chapters study the protest actions of chiefs and workers against externally imposed attempts to privatize the CDC, Cameroon's longest standing company, second largest employer and one of the few public enterprises that performed relatively well until the economic crisis in the 1980s. Chapter 6 may be his strongest chapter, focusing most explicitly on the protest actions of the tea pluckers in the region. This chapter documents the longest strike in Cameroon's history.

The seventh and eighth chapters focus on the role of smallholders and their cooperatives during the crisis and reform period. It is here where the shortcomings of the book are the strongest. The last two chapters are based on fieldwork and observations from the 1970s and 1980s but these chapters still need work to recognize the significance of these actors in the present day. Chapters 7 and 8 could address the impacts of the neoliberal reforms that happened after the period described. Also, as a reader, I would like to see a concluding chapter drawing all of these themes back together; the book simply ends.

*Crisis and Neoliberal Reforms in Africa* does not mention the environmental impacts of plantation economies – an issue that civil society researchers are currently engaging with in Cameroon as they grapple with the many new proposals for large-scale agriculture projects. The principal critique I have of the book is that Konings does not refine the notion that the wages from plantation labour have often been insufficient in providing a particular level of household security or self-sufficiency. By extension, many of the labour disputes Konings details were instigated not only by worker complaints over declining wages but also a strong inclination of the companies not to pay wages owing. The impacts these actions had on the companies are described, but not the impacts on the workers, their households, and ultimately how these actions affected livelihoods. Moreover, while the chapters often outline and document the histories of the companies, many of the workers' stories are sanitized or largely missing. While these limitations expose weaknesses in the book, Konings' narrative does make a notable contribution to the literature on agriculture and civil society in Cameroon and by extension Central Africa. I

invite readers to explore the concepts employed in Konings' book in their ongoing and future work.

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**The rise of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589**, by Toby Green, New York, Cambridge University Press 2012, xxvi + 333 pp.

The agents of the great cultural encounter promoted by the opening of the Atlantic in the fifteenth century were not unknown to each other. There was a pre-existing history of commercial and cultural relations through the vast trans-Saharan network that traditionally connected West African societies to the Mediterranean world. Toby Green's work shows how this previous commercial and multicultural environment in Western Africa helped the formation of the Atlantic world.

The book covers the period between 1300 and 1589 – from the Mandinka expansion into Upper Guinea and Senegambia to the year of the construction of the Portuguese fort at Cacheu and the implantation of *Kriolu* as a vernacular language in the region – and it is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the emergence of the process of “creolisation” within Western Africa, highlighting the importance of Atlantic slavery and slave production for its consolidation. It adopts a cultural approach to understand the context in which these commercial networks were formed, arguing that pre-Atlantic relations between the societies of Upper Guinea and the Mandinka rulers helped shape a general attitude of “cultural accommodation” and “receptivity” towards members of the Iberian mercantile diaspora. Therefore, the study of an “Atlantic Creole world” in Africa must acknowledge the influence of this preceding history of internal diasporic mercantile movements in Upper Guinea and its contact with the Mandinka expansion. The second part of the book concentrates on the years between 1492 and 1589, analyzing how the process of “creolisation” that started in Western Africa influenced “creolisation” in the Atlantic world. Green argues for an extensive trans-atlantic slave trade already in the sixteenth century, pointing to the existence of a “pan-Atlantic space” much earlier than is generally supposed by historians. He also argues for the existence of a “fundamental interconnection of creolisation and slavery in the trans-Atlantic paradigm right from the beginning, before the direct shipment of slaves from Western Africa to the Americas had even begun” (178).

Green builds a solid argument that the development of “creolisation” in Western Africa was facilitated by previous existing multicultural practices of both African and New Christian diaspora merchants. The Upper Guinean societies who engaged in commercial activities with Cape Verdean merchants and other European navigators visiting their coast by mid-fifteenth century were already inclined to such multicultural interactions due to cross-cultural trading diasporas within West Africa and a long period of trans-Saharan commerce. These Upper Guineans had intense commercial and cultural contacts with Mandinka and Mandinguised populations. This “receptivity” towards