The literature on Africa is dominated by accounts of crisis, doom and gloom, but this book presents one of the few long-running success stories. Thomas Bassett, a distinguished American geographer well known in the field of development, tells an unusual story of the growth of the cotton economy of West Africa, where change was brought about by tens of thousands of small-scale peasant farmers. While the introduction of new strains of cotton in francophone West Africa was in part the result of agronomic research by French scientists, supported by an unusually efficient marketing structure, this is not a case of triumphant top-down “planification.” Employing the case of Côte d’Ivoire, Professor Bassett shows agricultural intensification to result from the cumulative effect of decades of incremental changes in farming techniques and social organization. A significant contribution to the literature, the book demonstrates the need to consider the local and temporal dimensions of agricultural innovations. It brings into question many key assumptions that have influenced development policies during the twentieth century.

Thomas J. Bassett is Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He is co-author of Land in African Agrarian Systems (1993) and Maps of Africa to 1900 (2000), and has been engaged in long-term field work in Côte d’Ivoire since 1981.
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For Carol, Nick and Becca
The Peasant Cotton Revolution in West Africa
Côte d’Ivoire, 1880–1995

Thomas J. Bassett
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Over the years in which I have lived and conducted research in the community of Katiali, people have frequently asked me: “What are you going to do with this information?” From the start, most people were wary of my presence in their village. Just forty years earlier, when colonial administrators asked questions about household size and production, the information they collected was used to determine the number of laborers and sacks of grain the village was forced to provide for the “development” (la mise en valeur) of the colony. Many people still held vivid memories of the suffering and injustices experienced during this time.

I responded to these questions by saying that my country “gave” millions of dollars each year to countries like Côte d’Ivoire to help finance development projects. The problem was that too often decisions on how to allocate funds were made by people who had little idea of what conditions were like in places like Katiali. I was there, asking questions, so that I could go back to my country and influence the decision makers.

In retrospect, my response was earnest but ultimately naïve. First, it assumed that aid donors would in fact listen to what the farmers of Katiali had to tell me about their farming systems, and the obstacles they faced to improving their livelihoods. I soon learned that it was not going to be that easy. At the World Bank’s regional headquarters in Abidjan, it was difficult just to get past the reception desk. I felt like a trespasser in a gated professional community; muddy-booted researchers without connections were rarely permitted entry. When a sympathetic soul did open his or her door, I saw that most of the documents on the desk before me had the words “Confidential: For Official Use Only” stamped across the front of their gray covers. In short, both the guarded entry and the conditions of secrecy hindered my efforts to get a dialogue going on rural development issues pertinent to the people of Katiali. Although the bank has opened up more during the past decade, its structural adjustment policies still show an apparent deafness to the voices of peasant farmers.

I was also naïve about the capacity of individuals and groups like the farmers of Katiali to influence agricultural policies by their own actions.
The literature on African agriculture in the 1980s suggested just the opposite; its dominant themes of agricultural stagnation and disillusionment did not put peasant agency in a favorable light. Peasants were portrayed in largely passive terms, as either retreating from state-controlled markets or falling victim to the exploitation of merchants and industrial capital. The structures and logic of capital accumulation seemed to determine the course of events. Peasant agency amounted to little more than passive resistance to the exactions made on them by a monolithic state and metropolitan interests. At best, farmers were presented as given to experimenting with new crops based on their adaptiveness to local agro-ecological and social conditions, notably labor supplies. Yet, when it came to adopting innovations that would radically alter finely calibrated farming systems, these same farmers were shown to be conservative and unwilling to take risks. These portraits, I found, failed to capture the diverse ways in which peasants have actively participated in the making and remaking of their agricultural systems, to the point that such systems show little resemblance to how they appeared a generation earlier. Contrary to the image of agricultural stagnation, peasant farmer engagement with cotton in West Africa suggests that agricultural change has been momentous. The main argument of this book is that the dynamics of agrarian change have been driven by repeated contestation, negotiation, and innovation among farmers and a host of cotton developers (administrators, agricultural experts, cotton companies, merchants, and aid donors), as well as between them.

The book’s title seeks to draw attention to peasant farmer influences in shaping a cotton revolution in West Africa. My primary goal is to present an alternative agricultural and social history to the dominant development narrative, which portrays peasants as the simple recipients of technological innovations conceived and diffused by Western development experts. This heroic view of agrarian change informs the cotton development discourse on West Africa. Despite the populist veneer to this book’s title, this story has not been written as a simple counter-narrative that emphasizes peasant ingenuity in resisting or reworking state and private initiatives to intensify cotton. Rather, I attempt to bring out the multiplicity of interests and actors implicated in this story, and the changing circumstances and strategies that have contributed to its unfolding. Farmers have not simply reacted to external interventions; they have played important roles in creating the very conditions (farming systems, policies, and institutions) through which the cotton revolution has emerged. In this sense, peasant farmers of northern Côte d’Ivoire have been central to the making of their own agrarian history.

In doing the research for this book, I have been fortunate to have enjoyed the moral, intellectual, and financial support of many friends, colleagues,
and institutions. My deepest gratitude is to my wife, Carol Spindel, for joining me on the many research trips to Côte d’Ivoire and for helping me through critical periods of my fieldwork. Her assistance and companionship were vital to the successful completion of this project. Her own book, *In the Shadow of the Sacred Grove*, offers insights into the people and community of Katiali (Kalikaha), which complement this book in many interesting ways. I also want to thank our children, Nicholas and Rebecca, who, as toddlers and pre-teens, integrated themselves amazingly well into village life during our extended stays.

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To all, thank you. May all that you have given to me be returned to you a hundredfold.
Glossary

foroba foro  a collective field worked by members of the same descent group or kabila among the Jula

jamu  a family name identifying a Jula individual as belonging to a certain clan or patronymic group (e.g. Koné, Diabaté)

jasa  during the colonial period, a residential area located in the central administrative center (e.g. Korhogo) where the representatives of canton chiefs resided

jongarri  a personal field worked by a Jula individual

kabila  a Jula residential quarter

kabilatigi  the head of a Jula residential quarter

kagon  a personal field worked by a Senufo individual

kagonbile  a collective field headed by a Senufo residential quarter chief

karamoko  a learned Islamic scholar among the Jula

katienetio  a wife given by the parents or maternal uncle of the woman to a Senufo man “for doing a good deed”

katiolo  a Senufo residential quarter

katiolofolo  a Senufo residential quarter chief

kékourougou  a marriage arrangement, formerly common among the Nafara subgroup of the Senufo, in which the wife remains attached to her relatives’ production unit and often lives in a separate village from her husband

korofonwala  a period in the Senufo agricultural calendar meaning “everyone is hungry”

koulon pigué  a house captive among the Senufo; usually the descendant of a trade or war captive

lon  the Jula secret initiation society

londen  Jula initiates

lu  a subdivision of the Jula kabila that is also the basic unit of production

lutigi  the head of a Jula lu

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nerbatio a wife given by the head of a Senufo matrilineage to a man of the lineage
n’golon a system of reciprocal labor exchanges among the Senufo
poro the age-class secret initiation society of the Senufo
sando a Senufo diviner
segbo the Kiembara Senufo term for a collective field
segnon a lineage or multi-lineage collective field among the Kasambélé Senufo
segnontio a wife given by the Senufo village chief to a man for working in the collective field
sinzanga a sacred grove of the Senufo
sinzangafolo the spiritual head of a Senufo sacred grove
so a group of contiguous lu among the Jula
tarfolo the Senufo land priest and guardian of lineage land
tofotio a wife given by a parent or maternal uncle to a Senufo man
ton a collective work group among the Jula
tugubélé spirits of the bush, generally ambivalent towards humans
tyolo an initiate of the Senufo poro society during the final six-year cycle
woroso a house captive among the Jula who was born into a slave family