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PART I  
GENERAL

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTORY

THE application of scientific methods of investigation to the problems of agriculture in West Africa is a comparatively recent development. The only agencies that can undertake this are the Governments through their Agricultural Departments, and in their present form these departments are really a post-War development. It was the activities of traders that first led to the establishment of Colonial Government in West Africa, and this fact had a considerable influence for many years on the general policy of the Governments. Yet neither the early Governments nor even the Chartered Niger Company, took the view that their only duty or interest was to protect the traders and facilitate their operations. At a very early date many valuable plants were introduced from other parts of the tropics in the hope of their being adopted by the natives of the country, and eventually Botanic Gardens were established and officers appointed, whose special function was this introduction of new crops and economic plants. But the main object in view was still an immediate increase in export trade, and this tendency persisted even when Agricultural Departments were established. Indeed the motive for their establishment seems to have been chiefly the hope of inducing the people, by more consistent propaganda, to adopt new crops—which they had frequently proved reluctant to do, in spite of persuasion and promise of future profit. “Quick returns”

in the shape of increased production of export crops were similarly expected of the new Agricultural Departments, and their efforts to achieve these quick returns left them little opportunity for such a study of local farming and local conditions as alone could show what improvements were really feasible and likely to commend themselves to the native farmer. In any case the departments at first lacked adequate funds and staff. None the less they did much useful spade work; and by the time the War started, they had been able to define in some degree the problems before them; and to indicate the possibilities of progress. The staffs and funds of the departments were just being increased when the War caused all their activities to be suspended until a fresh start was made in 1921 or 1922.

The principle which guides all the actions of the Governments of West Africa to-day is the principle of trusteeship. In accordance with this principle it is the duty of the European Government, at all events of a heavily populated native dependency, to keep as its first and foremost object, not the benefit of European trade and the production of raw materials for the industries of Europe, but the moral and material advancement of the natives of the country. This is no new doctrine. It guided the actions of many administrators, district officers "in the bush", no less than Governors in the council chamber, long before it was officially enunciated. It is only in recent years, however, that this policy has been clearly defined and all its logical consequences universally accepted as the basic policy of the Governments of West Africa. Following this policy it becomes one of the duties of Government to study all

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the problems of local agriculture and the application of scientific methods to its improvement. Thus this policy led, immediately after the War, to a reorganization of the Agricultural Departments, and to their being supplied with the necessary funds, equipment and buildings. The purpose of the departments is now considered to be, not merely to stimulate production for export by native farmers, but to try to assist them to increased prosperity and well-being in all directions. In order to accomplish this it is necessary not merely to study what export crops can be grown, but also to try to increase the quantity or quality of the native foodstuffs. The economics of native agriculture thus become the foundation of agricultural policy. Incidentally it may be noted that this same policy is the one which in the long run will lead to the maximum production of raw materials, for if labour is saved in the production of foodstuffs, it becomes available for production for export. The “mandate” is a dual one, concerned with the material advancement of the people to take their part in the world’s work, as well as with their cultural progress; and their material advancement is at present, at all events, bound up with the production of raw materials for export, after they have provided for their own food.

Instead of directly attempting to persuade the native farmer to grow certain crops which are required in trade, the agricultural officer now asks “Will this crop be profitable to the farmer? What assistance does he need in order to make it profitable for him? Is the variety of the crop which he grows well suited to local conditions? Is it the best that can be found? Does he need assistance in marketing its produce to good advantage? Can I

ascertain for him by experiments whether a new crop would be suitable and profitable for him?" The agriculturalist in fact now tries to look at everything from the native farmer's point of view. It may be mentioned that the farmer's real views are by no means always the same as the facile statements which he will make to a casual enquirer, not really with intent to deceive, but rather because courtesy demands that he should give some answer to every question. The aim of the administrative officer is equally the prosperity of the native farmer and an appreciation of his problems. Co-operation between the agricultural and the administrative officers should thus be easy; and if this co-operation has not always been as close as it should be, the reason has been a lack of mutual appreciation of their common aim.

It is not surprising that the African farmer is suspicious of advice given by Europeans. His own methods have been evolved and adapted during many generations, so that they suit local conditions and also suit his economic position, his social arrangements, his psychology and his tastes. It will generally be found that by them he obtains a maximum return from a minimum of labour. True he often prefers a method that is slow rather than one that is quicker but involves harder work for a shorter time. This is due to the fact that he does the labour himself and therefore regards it from a different view point from one who pays for it by the day or hour. A European will often think that the methods are either inefficient or tedious and that he could easily suggest something better and more up-to-date. Unless the subject has been very thoroughly studied and every effort made to judge it from the native farmer's point of

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view, the suggestion is likely to be a misguided one. Provided it is strictly a suggestion, very tentatively put forward, perhaps no harm is done; but in the past Europeans have gone much further than merely to suggest, and have recommended, advised, persuaded, almost forced, the farmer to adopt their proposals, often without having first attempted to ascertain whether they were acceptable to him. Many instances could be quoted where this has been done and where the attempt was a complete failure. Such failures not only discredit the European in the eyes of the native farmer, but arouse in him a justifiable suspicion of all new ideas, which suspicion, once acquired, is not readily forgotten. Again, the prevalent idea that the native farmer is excessively conservative is largely due to the mistakes of Europeans in the past. These mistakes have been made by both agricultural and administrative officers. In the opinion of the authors, the native farmer in general is certainly not more conservative than the average English farmer; indeed many native farmers are much less conservative than most English farmers. If they can see that a new thing is worth trying they will willingly try it; but they very naturally resent being pressed to take up something in which they do not believe, or which they do not yet understand. The development of the production of cocoa in the Gold Coast, and of groundnuts in Northern Nigeria are examples of the way in which the native can develop a new industry almost entirely unaided, when he is satisfied that it is sound; and the failure of American cotton in Southern Nigeria is an example of how obstinate he can be when an attempt is made to force upon him something in which he does not believe.

While the statements that the native farmer knows his own business and that his methods are specially adapted to his own conditions are largely true, yet it does not follow that the European agricultural officer can do nothing to improve native farming. For one thing, the economic conditions to which the native system is adapted may be those of the past; and when changes in these conditions are involved there is an opportunity to help the farmer to adjust himself to them. Again, in evolving his methods he had not the advantage of scientific knowledge, nor the ability to carry out scientific experiments. The scientific study of tropical agriculture is in its infancy, and there is no doubt that some day there will be revolutionary changes in West African methods. But even while studying and preparing for these bigger changes, the agriculturalist can do a great deal to improve existing practices and crops; provided that, before suggesting anything to the native farmer, it is first proved by experiment to be in every way sound. This then is the new point of view from which the tropical agriculturalist has to judge everything connected with his work. Every idea must first be tested experimentally, and while conducting the experiments, the experimenter must attempt to see his idea from the farmer's point of view. This method may seem slow at first, but it is sure, and by this means alone is it possible to avoid the fatal mistake of losing the native farmer's confidence. At the same time, such work enables the experimenter to become an experienced local farmer himself.

The Agricultural Departments in West Africa are sometimes criticized on the grounds that in spite of the



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large sums of money spent on agricultural research, no very tangible results have as yet been produced, and native agriculture is in precisely the same state as it was ten or twelve years ago. The statement is not entirely true, and moreover it must be remembered that scientific investigation into agricultural problems is a slow process; for experiments, even with annual crops, have to be repeated over a series of years in order to take into account weather and other seasonal variations before a conclusion can safely be drawn. Experiments on the treatment of permanent crops naturally take still longer. Also, in West Africa, the investigator has a difficulty that he does not encounter in more advanced countries, in that he cannot take, as his starting point, the local general knowledge of the innumerable details of farming such as seed rates, and the best time for carrying out all operations; but he has to devote much effort to elucidating these elementary questions for himself before he can effectively study any more advanced matters. If we are to be sure that the suggestions that we lay before the native farmer are thoroughly sound, we cannot hurry the preliminary experimental work. Once we are able to see, from the success of the pioneers who have adopted them, that our suggestions are good, then rapid extension is feasible.

Since the test of all our results and conclusions is whether or not they are considered "sound" by the native farmer, it remains to consider what "soundness" means to him. In England, where land is scarce, rent and expenses high, the utility or otherwise of any agricultural improvement is judged largely by the profit or loss per acre, and anything which will increase the profit per

acre is generally of merit, and likely to be adopted by the farmer. This, however, is not always the case in the tropics. Here, land is plentiful except in a few well-defined areas, such as the thickly populated area around Kano, in Nigeria, and parts of the cocoa belt of the Gold Coast. Generally no rent is paid, every native has a right to a piece of land, and among many tribes money, as such, beyond being a means of paying the tax, has still comparatively little meaning, so that small differences of profit and loss per acre are comparatively unimportant. The thing which really counts is labour. Everything has to be done by hand and the test of soundness is the return per normal day's work. A man and his family can only do so many days' work per year, and this strictly limits the amount of land which can be cultivated. Assuming that his farm is the maximum which a farmer and his family can manage if they work hard, then no change, however valuable it may be in cash, is an improvement if it necessitates the expenditure of much more labour. This is very clearly illustrated by the attempt that was made to introduce American cotton in Southern Nigeria. The crop grew well and the yields obtained from experimental plots were at least as good as those obtained from native cottons, while the produce fetched much more per pound than native seed cotton. Yet when seed of this cotton was offered to the native farmers they repeatedly showed—in deeds though not in words—that they would have nothing to do with it. It was subsequently seen that the point which had been completely missed was that of the return per day's work. American cotton would not do well in competition with other crops; it was only a success when grown