African Agriculture and the Omissions of Development
A Review Article

The problems of agriculture in present-day Africa are enormous. Bodies such as the World Bank and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are ceaselessly striving to change, improve, modernize or/and monetarize agriculture in the continent. Their activities are so hectic in fact that it would seem that African agriculture is in imminent danger of final collapse. Hence, with the continent seemingly in the grip of starvation and economic crisis there would appear to be no time to waste in undertaking an in-depth analysis and no time for the study of agricultural history, tradition and acculturation. In consequence, although everyone is talking about adaptation and sustainability they are invariably referring to an imported agriculture. Though agriculture is a phenomenon related to time and space, World Bank and NGO development projects neglect such factors, with the result that the impression is increasingly given of agricultural development which is both spaceless and timeless, especially in the context of Africa. All of the books reviewed here belong to this category, with the exception of *Bush Base: Forest Farm.* This is a study which is more spiritual than economic. In fascinating detail, it shows that the environment and the cosmos are inseparable, and it provides an insight into the wide cultural variations in ecological, economic and social perceptions and practices.

Another of the books, *Aid to African Agriculture,* sets out to analyse the last two decades. The study is the result of research into ‘Managing


Agricultural Development in Africa” (MADIA), a long-term project undertaken by the World Bank together with the Commission of the European Communities (CEC), the British, French and German governments, and the Danish (DANIDA) and Swedish (SIDA) development agencies. Eight of the contributions participate in an assessment of the effectiveness of agriculture in East Africa—Kenya, Malawi and Tanzania—and in Cameroon, Nigeria and Senegal in West Africa. The present book, the first of three volumes, consists of the eleven MADIA papers thus far available, which were originally published as World Bank Discussion Papers.

In all of these papers, three aspects of the many oversights already mentioned above are visible in particular, all of them connected in some way with the deeper meaning of sustainability.

Firstly, it has been forgotten that the African continent has the longest agricultural tradition on earth, since it was in that continent that the human species originated. The black African tradition is strong but also vital. A central role is played in daily life by the ancestors of the living: from them the land has come and to them all land returns. This land is, therefore, far more than a mere factor in production: it plays a central role as root, as origin, as historical stratum, as a means of passing on life. Land is not simply land, just as land is different in different places and at different times. Such aspects have been considered in *Bush Base*, however. One is left wondering, therefore, what the meaning of sustainability can be if precisely this dimension of duration or history in a specific context is omitted from any study in the field. In addition, Part II of *Bush Base* contains the welcome inclusion of five papers under the heading of “Eco-cosmologies,” which go some way towards countering the tendency of many scientists still to treat Africa as if it had been without history until the arrival of colonialism and development.

Secondly, the majority of the studies do not reflect the former colonial status of the African nations. There is, of course, an enormous difference between a colonial and a national agriculture. For nineteenth-century Europeans, African land was merely the hinterland of their national economies, where one could easily experiment and specialize since the hinterland was a part of the national economy. But when the independence of the African hinterland came, this role was forgotten. As a result, Africa’s agricultural blight is rooted in the acceptance of the structures