

Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500–2000. By James C. McCann. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. xiii + 289 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, maps, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$27.95. ISBN: 0-674-01718-8.

Reviewed by Robert L. Tignor

Maize and Grace is as fine an example of the new history as one is likely to find. In this book, the old ways of doing things have been kicked aside. To begin with, the time dimension is truly the *longue durée*. By the *longue durée*, the author does not mean several decades or even a century or two. His purview is a half a millennium. The source materials are intriguing and outstanding. McCann uses the traditional archival and secondary sources that historians are experts in. But he adds many new disciplines, demonstrating in the process that historians will have to master new fields if they want to do the kind of important research on display here. Linguistic analysis appears at important junctures. So do DNA material, the biological behavior of plants and animals, and many more disciplines that are usually off the historians' radar screen.

But the proof of the pudding, after all, is in the eating. The meal McCann offers is especially appetizing. The results of looking at the introduction and spread of a single crop (maize) across the African continent over the span of five centuries are breathtaking. Maize transformed African life everywhere it went, but not always in the same ways and at the same times. The story makes for exciting drama and is told with the verve of a good mystery writer. McCann lays out the clues before describing what would have seemed at first glance unlikely results but appear to be logical developments once all the background information has been assembled.

The historical narrative of maize cultivation is full of strange twists and puzzling ironies. A crop that requires careful human attention in its pollination if it is to retain its good features, and that was unknown in Africa until the sixteenth century, has become Africa's primary food product. Of the twenty-two countries in which maize constitutes the highest proportion in the national diet, sixteen are in Africa. Indeed, three-quarters of the maize consumed in the world today is eaten in Africa. When one considers that

maize was not even known on the African continent in 1500, it is apparent that the changes in cultivation and consumption habits were radical and require careful historical analysis.

McCann starts at the beginning, identifying 1540 as the date for the first documentary evidence of maize cultivation in Africa. Maize quickly became an essential food crop in the Asante kingdom, as important to the Asante *imperium* as gold mining and the slave trade. Without the infusion of carbohydrates into the West African farmers' diets, one doubts that Asante or any of the other slave-exporting economies in that part of the world could have been such energetic participants in the Atlantic slave trade. This might well have spared the world a bitter legacy, but it would surely have altered the economic and political development of the Americas, not to mention the historical trajectory of slave-exporting polities like Asante.

McCann follows his discussion of maize in Asante by looking at Nigeria, where the story proves to be quite different. Today, the Nigerians are among the world's biggest consumers of maize. It was not always so. Linguistic and other forms of evidence indicate that Nigerian cultivators were not so quick to adopt the new product, coming to it only when it was introduced across the Sahara desert and not by Portuguese and other European traders operating off the West African coast. Most historians have identified Europeans as the source of African maize cultivation, but linguistic evidence, especially the material that the author marshaled for Nigeria, indicates that the product came from the north. Indeed, only one Nigerian people, the Itsekiri, employed a Portuguese-derived term to refer to the new plant.

McCann's title is an intriguing one: *Maize and Grace*. The underlying question is whether maize has been beneficial to the Africans, representing a source of grace, or whether it has contributed to the continent's long history of impoverishment. In one sense, the question has an obvious answer: Without the life-sustaining qualities that maize brought to Africa, without its high carbohydrate content, and without its adaptability to Africa's difficult tropical climates and terrains, Africans would be less well fed and life would be more difficult. But obviously there is more here than meets the eye, given the fact that maize is the crop par excellence of peoples living in the world's poorest continent. Is there a connection? Or does maize cultivation prevent

conditions from being worse than they would otherwise be? One hint that maize may be a mixed blessing comes in the next-to-last chapter, where the author removes his historian's hat to become a public health researcher. Endeavoring to explore the recently discovered connection between maize cultivation and the spread of malaria, McCann joined with a team of researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health in a project focused on Ethiopia, where this connection seemed most robust. The results, though far from definitive, seemed to indicate that in areas where maize was being cultivated, anopheles mosquitoes were bigger, longer lived, and more effective in spreading malaria. In short, while the introduction and spread of maize has brought countless benefits to the African continent, like most innovations, it has had significant deleterious consequences.

This brief, well-written, and amply illustrated book points out new directions in historical studies. It will be a welcome addition to any Africanist's library.

Robert L. Tignor is professor of history at Princeton University. He has just completed a biography of W. Arthur Lewis, a pioneering development economist, whose writings were directed to newly independent countries in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.