

# **Book review 2025: Appendix: Agricultural References in Paul Erdmann Isert's Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade (1788)**

Implementable Research Uses

Economic Historians: Evidence of early advocacy for African agro-industrialization.

Agricultural Development Experts: Comparison of 18th-century crop proposals with today's fairtrade cocoa, coffee, cotton sectors.

# *Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade*



Paul Erdmann Isert's  
*Journey to Guinea and  
the Caribbean Islands in Columbia*  
(1788)

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## Highlights

**Economic Historians:** Evidence of early advocacy for African agro-industrialization.

**Agricultural Development Experts:** Comparison of 18th-century crop proposals with today's **fairtrade cocoa, coffee, cotton** sectors.

**Policy Makers:** Blueprint for **local value addition** in Africa.

**Sustainability Advocates:** Historical precedent for **ESG-aligned agriculture**.

## Content

# Appendix: Agricultural References in Paul Erdmann Isert's *Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade* (1788)

## 1. General Agricultural Vision

### **Preface** (pp. 1-2)

Emphasizes preserving knowledge of African customs, including agriculture.

Notes intention to document **botanical discoveries** and announces *Prodromus floræ australis*, listing new species.

### **Biography (Editor's Intro)** (pp. 16-17)

Isert's **West Indies experience** made him realize slaves were exploited for crops like **sugar, cotton, and coffee**.

Conceived plan for plantations in Africa to produce the same commodities.

## 2. Specific Crops Mentioned

Crop	Context in Iser't's Letters	Page Reference	Notes
<b>Sugarcane</b>	Proposed for Akuapem hills, fertile as West Indies	pp. 16-17, 273-304	Seen as the main alternative to Caribbean sugar plantations.
<b>Cotton</b>	Indigenous cultivation already practiced in some parts of West Africa	pp. 16-17, 273-304	Could be expanded into export production.
<b>Coffee</b>	Recommended for Akuapem highlands	p. 16-17	Environmental suitability noted (cooler, elevated).
<b>Indigo</b>	Identified as a high-value export dye crop	pp. 16-17	European textile industries highly dependent on indigo dye.
<b>Palm Oil</b>	Observed in local food use and trade	pp. 182-246 (Eighth Letter)	Early recognition of its economic potential.
<b>Yams &amp; Plantains</b>	Staple African crops admired for nutrition and adaptability	pp. 182-246	Praised African diets as "sensible" compared to Europeans.
<b>Maize</b>	Common subsistence crop in coastal regions	pp. 182-246	Considered part of the balanced African diet.
<b>Tobacco</b>	Mentioned as a commodity in coastal trade	pp. 113-130 (Sixth Letter)	Europeans exchanged it for local goods.

### 3. Agricultural Geography

**Volta Lowlands** – fertile but “unhealthy” (malaria risk) for Europeans.

**Akuapem Hills** – praised for fertility, cooler climate, and suitability for commercial crops (sugar, coffee, cotton, indigo).

**Coastal Ghana (Accra, Popo, Fida)** – subsistence crops (yams, maize, plantain) and some export crops observed.

## 4. Agricultural and Economic Reform Plan

### **Frederiksnopel Colony (1788-1789)** (pp. 273-304)

Intended as a **model plantation colony** producing sugar, cotton, coffee, and indigo.

Local African labor would be retained in Africa, eliminating the Middle Passage.

Slaves would be treated as serfs, without brutal discipline.

Strict rules: no maltreatment, no slave-trading within the colony, no concubinage — European settlers were required to bring wives.

## 5. Broader Botanical Notes

Throughout his letters, insert documents flora:

**Rio Volta (Sixth Letter, pp. 113-130):** Descriptions of plant life, some medicinal.

**Akuapem (Tenth Letter, pp. 273-304):** Botanical diversity recorded.

Mentions intent to publish a flora catalogue (*Index Plantarum*, noted in Preface).

## Summary Table: Agricultural Potential in Isert's Observations

Region	Staple Crops	Commercial Crops Proposed	Notes
<b>Volta Lowlands</b>	Yam, maize	Sugarcane (but malaria-prone)	Health challenges undermined viability.
<b>Akuapem Hills</b>	Plantain, yam, maize	Sugar, coffee, indigo	Fertile and healthy for Europeans. Site of Frederiksnopel colony.
<b>Coastal Ghana</b>	Yam, maize, palm oil	Cotton, tobacco, palm oil	Strategic for trade via forts.
<b>West Indies (Comparison)</b>	Sugar, coffee, cotton	—	Inspired Isert's African plantation model.

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# Bibliographic Anchors

Preface, pp. 1-2 – preservation of customs and flora

Editor's Introduction, pp. 16-17 – crops proposed (sugar, cotton, coffee, indigo)

Eighth Letter, pp. 182-246 – Akra diet, palm oil, yams, maize, plantain

Sixth Letter, pp. 113-130 – Rio Volta crops & trade

Tenth Letter, pp. 273-304 – Akuapem fertility, Frederiksnopel plantation plan