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

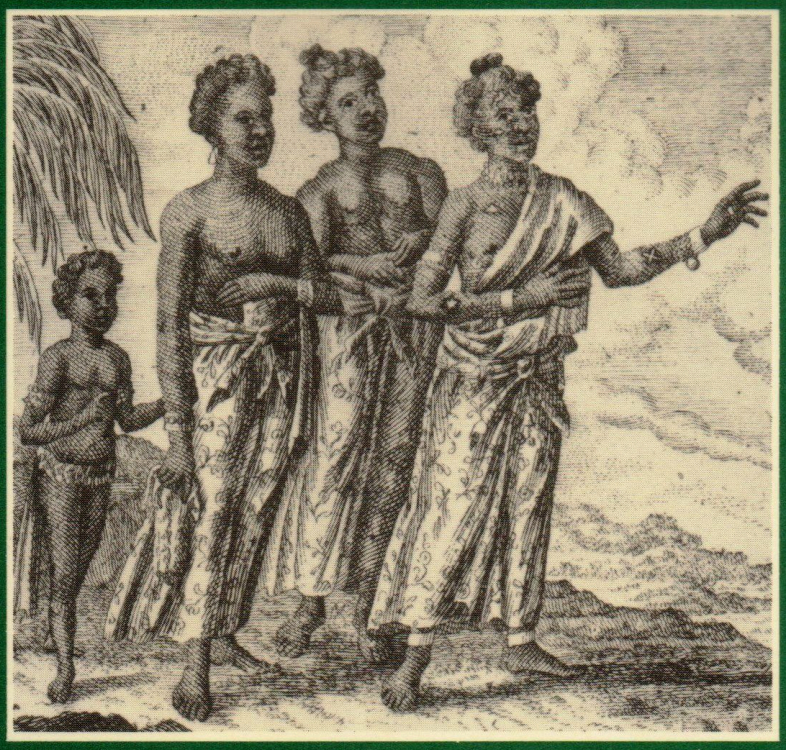
Implementable Research Uses

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.

Rendered from Anang Tawiah's Blog

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 Isert's Letters	Page Reference	Notes
Sugarcane	Proposed for Akuapem hills, fertile as West Indies	pp. 16–17, 273–304	Seen as the main alternative to Caribbean sugar plantations.
Cotton	Indigenous cultivation already practiced in some parts of West Africa	pp. 16–17, 273–304	Could be expanded into export production.
Coffee	Recommended for Akuapem highlands	p. 16–17	Environmental suitability noted (cooler, elevated).
Indigo	Identified as a high-value export dye crop	pp. 16–17	European textile industries highly dependent on indigo dye.
Palm Oil	Observed in local food use and trade	pp. 182–246 (Eighth Letter)	Early recognition of its economic potential.
Yams & Plantains	Staple African crops admired for nutrition and adaptability	pp. 182–246	Praised African diets as "sensible" compared to Europeans.
Maize	Common subsistence crop in coastal regions	pp. 182–246	Considered part of the balanced African diet.
Tobacco	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, Isert 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
Volta Lowlands	Yam, maize	Sugarcane (but malaria-prone)	Health challenges undermined viability.
Akuapem Hills	Plantain, yam, maize	Sugar, cotton, coffee, indigo	Fertile and healthy for Europeans. Site of Frederiksnopel colony.
Coastal Ghana	Yam, maize, palm oil	Cotton, tobacco, palm oil	Strategic for trade via forts.
West Indies (Comparison)	Sugar, coffee, cotton	—	Inspired Isert’s African plantation model.

Implementable Research Uses

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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