



By Jenny Neill

Drying Shed in W. Uganda, Bukonzo Joint Co-op

# East African Coffees: Solving the Heartbreak of Poor Arrival Scores

**Q**uality coffees grown in Africa's landlocked countries enjoy ideal growing conditions but often arrive with a foul taste due to mishaps in storage and handling.

International Coffee Agreements abandoned in the 1980s preceded a period of brutal civil wars and acts of genocide in several countries where geographic isolation and tribal tensions have turned the promise of independence into a never-ending battle for domination. Periods of relative stability for one group are soon countered by repression or mass killings of others.

Billions in military and humanitarian aid awarded during the past 30 years has done little to establish reliable commerce. Dissension over who owns the land and who has the right to settle disputes persists.

Craig Holt, founder at Atlas Coffee Importers, said that "Africa will break your heart. You see so much potential there and what you end up taking delivery of is often just not useful because of [the] baggy, faded, sacky-assed taste that it takes on." Of what Atlas imports in a given year, 20% to 25% is from eastern African nations, according to Holt.

Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Malawi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) face a unique obstacle to agricultural commerce: none have direct access to a harbor. Sacks of green beans travel long distances on poor roads to ports in other countries before it can be shipped. Widespread lack of understanding that coffee is a beverage (since few workers drink coffee) and the limited comprehension of agricultural practices, such as the best times to fertilize trees or to pick cherries, also hinder production quality.

Specialty buyers return year after year despite the fact no one seems capable of solving larger societal problems.

Coalitions of business, charities, foreign governments and NGOs have funded new pilot projects and small scale initiatives. Already, such efforts show promising results.

## Civil war leads to bad berries

Conflicts are the single biggest threat to re-establishing a successful coffee export business in Eastern Africa. Kat Nolte, coffee marketer for the Joint Marketing Ini-



Teaching not to pick green cherries.

tiative (JMI) recounted her experiences interviewing farmers in the DRC: "It's a huge issue. When you hear producers talk about it, they will describe massive chaos, confusion, and civil war. A lot of people lost their lives smuggling coffee across the lakes, leaving behind orphans and widows."

Isolation also bred misconceptions about the commercial uses for coffee. Nolte relayed this story:

"Historically, [the people of western Uganda] thought coffee was used to make bullets or gunpowder or some kind of ammunition. When they would hear rumors about war going on across the border in Congo or elsewhere in the Rwenzori Mountains, some farmers would cut down their coffee trees to stop the production of weapons."

Persistence of such myths and ancient traditions are the byproducts of dealing with outbreaks of violence for decades.

When they returned to their land, the smallholders (most farm less than two hectares) also returned to practices learned during the heyday of production.

Most grow as much coffee as they can, pick it early, dry it on the ground, and sell low at buying stations to make quick cash. These habits, passed from generation to generation, date to the 1950s and 1960s a time when high yield c-market coffee mattered most. Commodity traders still buy lower grades but 50-year-old practices result in poor cupping scores.

Such bad habits also exacerbate some emerging problems that impact both c-markets and specialty supply chains. Eastern Africa, like Central and South America, is experiencing erratic weather, and the consequent plant-pest and disease problems that often accompany a change in climate. Years of monoculture, with only recent attempts to reintroduce inter-planting of trees and other subsis-



Drying shed as seen from outside

tence or cash crops, has resulted in devastating landslides in Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi.

Short-term aid has largely failed to catalyze lasting change. Now, governments and aid organizations are lending their financial support to longer-term initiatives because all involved see the value of identifying a sustainable business model for smallholders.

No single approach can address all the issues that contribute to discrepancies found between pre-shipping cuppings and arrival scores. But some recent projects are already showing signs of success.

### Moving away from monoculture

Malawi is best known for exporting tobacco, tea and cannabis, though coffee growing dates back to the 19th century. Foreign investment and government agricultural policies encouraged tenant farmers to keep land planted in cash crops, notably tobacco, in the latter half of the 20th century. These practices, along with changing weather patterns, resulted in massive commercial losses and famine. Today, improving soil nutrition and yields is paramount to making coffee viable again as an export.

Mzuzu Coffee, one of the JMI founding cooperatives, encourages members to intercrop beans with coffee trees to increase soil fertility without chemicals. These farmers are planting shade trees and tall grasses to reduce soil erosion. Yield and coffee quality both improved, and farmers now bring more than one cash crop to market.

Nolte interviewed more than 100 farmers in Malawi about their progress this year. Though work still needs to be done, she came away impressed: “They’re showing off their solar panels and beautiful homes in their rural villages. They all know exactly how many trees they have, what their yield per tree is, their costs of inputs, and how many new trees they have planted. Coffee is lifting them out of poverty.”

She credits the “model farmer” approach that the co-op takes with new members for much of their success. Mzuzu smallholders are asked to make a 10-year commitment to farming and to set socio-economic goals by asking members to answer such questions as: “How much money do you want to make?” and “How much will you spend on essentials like eating three meals a day or on sending your kids to school?”

### Up from the dirt

In other areas, however, the farming industry is less mature and requires an entirely different approach. In western Uganda, convincing farmers that the beans will not become bullets starts with sharing a cup of coffee. Nolte paraphrased a typical smallholder reaction: “Oh wait, we’re actually going to ingest this? Let’s dry it on raised beds, let’s treat it like we would treat our food.” This basic understanding quickly produces quality improvements. Nolte explained the impact: “Instead of letting the chickens walk all over it and do their business on your coffee, promoting a coffee culture at origin gets farmers to understand it’s an agricultural product that you consume.”

JMI is not alone in working with farmers to improve the conditions under which Ugandan arabica is processed. The Rainforest Alliance is piloting a new type of drying station, with funding from UK’s Food Retail Industry Challenge Fund and in cooperation with Ecom Agroindustrial Corporation and Kawacom, its export arm in Kampala. Norman Mukuru, an agricultural economist consulting with the sustainable agriculture division of the Rainforest Alliance, described why drying under proper conditions is so important to coffee quality: “During cold weather conditions, coffee takes long periods to dry and some will reabsorb moisture when drying is not (done) under shed. These conditions encourage mold growth, which lead to production of mycotoxins.”

The new facility was designed to be flexible and durable. Four layers of translucent fiberglass roofing can be manipulated to produce more or less shade as deemed necessary by the station manager. It can dry 2,000 kilos or more of parchment per week. More than 6,200 Rainforest Alliance certified farmers have registered to use the shed.

Rick Tingley, coffee buying manager at Taylor’s of Harrogate, considers the retractable roof an innovative way to cope with erratic weather patterns in Uganda. It represents a well-thought-out alternative to mechanical drying. Both Mukuru and Tingley hope that the first “roof-dried” shipments will be much improved.

Another practice making a comeback in Eastern Africa is that of de-pulping cherries. Many cooperatives in the DRC, Rwanda, and western Uganda now use micro-washing stations that serve tens to hundreds of smallholders, versus the thousands processed in facilities like Kawacom.

Bukonzo Joint, a co-op of growers at elevations above 1,200 meters, promotes these small-scale facilities to local smallholders. Stations are equipped with a motorized pulper with a manager responsible for maintaining this equipment. African coffees are becoming known by the name of the washing station.

### Sustainable coffee?

Specialty coffee traders have grown accustomed to being beguiled then disappointed by the cupping profiles of washed arabicas like the geisha of Mzuzu in Malawi or the single-origin bourbon of Sopacdi in the DRC.

Projects like JMI or the pilot of the new drying station at Kawacom are changing that. Smallholders are taking better care of their soil, picking ripe cherries and learning better ways to process their coffee. Quality is improving: arrival profiles are growing more consistent with pre-ship cupping scores.

These signs of progress are what keep experts on cup quality from the buying side of the supply chain, like Holt, returning. He acknowledged these efforts are just the beginning of what many hope will be bigger, lasting change: “I think people have come a long, long way from a lot of really difficult challenges. I am motivated to keep trying because of what I see in terms of the potential.”

And, by all accounts, resuming commerce is returning some stability to the region. Nolte reflected on progress in the DRC: “It’s really inspiring to listen to the producers. Before they formed their cooperatives, they were very mistrustful and operating in isolation. They talk about how they speak one language now, and that language is coffee.”

Now, their products are once again available to consumers. The first single origin, Fairtrade-certified coffee from Sopacdi was released this year at 575 Sainsbury stores in the UK. ☕