

## INTRODUCTION

### The Broad Significance of the Study of Peasant Agriculture in the Tropics

The study of native methods of agriculture is receiving increasing attention in the tropical dependencies, and it is now recognised that such a study is essential if improvements are to have a sound practical basis and be capable of successful introduction.

The practice of mixed cropping is an integral part of native methods of agriculture throughout the tropics, and, combined with shifting cultivation, may be said to provide the major distinction between crop husbandry in such regions and the systems developed in temperate climates. To those with experience of farming in Europe and in North America the practice of mixed cropping at first sight appears haphazard and inefficient, while the periodic shifting of the cultivated area appears wasteful of land and labour. It is now, however, realised that there are reasons for native methods which may not at first be appreciated, and that caution is necessary before passing judgment on practices which seem to offend European agricultural principles. Indigenous agricultural systems have been developed over a long period to suit the prevailing conditions of climate and density of population, and the native resources in labour, implements and crop varieties. Where such conditions still largely prevail there is little reason to suppose that local systems are unsatisfactory, but in very few localities today are conditions materially unaltered from those in which these systems were developed. In nearly every tropical territory the circumstances under which agriculture is carried on have altered, often very considerably, in the last few decades, and show prospect of even more rapid alteration in the near future. New agricultural methods, suited to the new conditions, have thus become necessary, if progress is to be made.

Increased pressure on the land is making imperative the substitution of shifting cultivation by some more permanent form of

agriculture. The most hopeful line of approach to the problem lies in the modification of established methods of peasant agriculture in the light of modern agricultural knowledge.

The necessary procedure in the evolution of a suitable agricultural system requires, firstly, a study of indigenous cultural methods. Much work on this subject has already been done, and descriptions of native cropping systems in many tropical regions of the Empire have been published in recent years. The second requirement is the establishment of what particular improvements are desired, such as the most profitable cash crops to grow, and what food crops are necessary to supply local needs. A general economic study of the region is here necessitated, as well as agricultural investigation. The third requirement is the devising of an agricultural system attaining the desired objectives and capable of being put into local practice, and its adequate testing before being introduced to the cultivators.

The actual systems found most suitable will no doubt vary widely in different regions, and the rate of change from the local practice will vary with locally operating factors. Nevertheless, experience in one region is of value in another, and in this respect it may be that research concerning peasant agriculture in the West Indies may later be of particular value in tropical Africa, for economic conditions in the latter may be expected in the future to approach those of the former in many respects.