

MUSEVENI AND KOBE BEEF

by Nicolás Valle*

Yoweri Museveni had never heard of Kobe beef. They told him about it during the Third International Conference on African Development in Tokyo¹. Someone decided to regale the Ugandan president with details of one of the most exquisite secrets of Japanese cuisine. Kobe beef comes from a herd that is only bred in the south of Honshu Island. The cows are fed a strict diet that includes select herbs, and several litres of beer every day. The animals are reared with special attention and excessive care: classical music in the cowshed, sponged down with sake and daily massages to improve their muscle tone. The aim is to ensure the fat and muscle fibre are perfectly blended in order to produce soft, tasty meat, containing pure protein. Museveni² comes from a farming family and undoubtedly will have enjoyed the explanations as to the peculiarities of Japanese livestock production. However, what most impressed him was the price of Kobe beef: 170 euros a kilo.

It was to be a revelation for the Ugandan leader. The impact was of such magnitude that he decided to change the contents of his speech to the conference. Museveni admitted that until that moment he had believed that the West only cheated the Third World. After discovering the price of a Japanese steak he had discovered that the developed countries in fact, cheated everyone, 'the Western world is cheating its own people by charging these inflated prices, and it cheats us, the Africans, denying us economic growth, denying us access to international markets to sell our goods'. The former guerrilla leader temporarily abandoned his role as head of state and spoke to the audience as he still sees himself, 'I am, among other things, a farmer', he declared. The sums did not add up and he had to say it loud and clear, 'I sell my beef for 80 cents and the intermediaries sell it in the markets and butcher's for 1.70 euros. That same kilo of beef costs 17 euros in London and 170 euros in Japan. If the British bought my beef for 4 euros and sold

it for 8, we'd all win: the Europeans and myself'. These are not the figures an expert in economics would use and things are not so simple in international trade, but Museveni used the price of Kobe beef to expose the brutally asymmetrical economic relationship the developed countries maintain with Africa.

People often speak of the continent's scars, always producing similar ideas: tribalism, meningitis outbreaks, wars, malnutrition and so on. They never speak of the fact that European Union, Japanese and American protectionism has done more to devastate the cotton plantations in Burkina Faso than the yearly plagues of locusts. What is the difference between a banana from the Canary Islands and one from Mozambique? Absolutely none. The colour, taste and potassium levels are the same, but the first enjoys preferential treatment simply because it was planted on land belonging to the European Union. Subsidies from Brussels for agriculture and livestock

1 An international forum founded in 1993 under a Japanese government initiative. It includes various international cooperation bodies, the United Nations and the World Bank. Its objective is to promote economic growth and security on the African continent. The third Conference was held in November 2004. The fifth was held in June of this year in Kampala.

2 Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, Ntungamo (Uganda), 1944. President of Uganda since 1986, when he took power following the toppling of Milton Obote. He was leader of the guerrilla group National Resistance Army. Museveni is considered fortunate for contemporary Uganda's political stability, while being a destabilising influence on the conflicts surrounding the Great Lakes.

rearing in the EU are the highest in the world. It is estimated that two out of every three euros from the cost of production come directly from official EU aid. It is impossible for an African meat or dairy producer to compete with butter subsidised by France or with beef from Extremaduran mutton, protected from when the animal is in the field to the supermarket shelf. Western subsidies have had, in some instances, disastrous consequences. A prime example are those approved by the Bush administration to protect the nation's cotton farmers. The White House's decision led to thousands of tonnes of this product being left to rot in the warehouses of Chad, Mali and Benin, where cotton represents some 70% of income from international agricultural commerce. It is not a problem of trade balance: exports are the main strategic weapon in these countries' fight against poverty. It is a weapon that is systematically denied them by government offices and the headquarters of large industrial corporations.

THE 'BLACK CONTINENT' EXERCISES A FORM OF FORCED ALTRUISM THAT HELPS TO MAINTAIN JOB STABILITY IN HOLLAND, IRELAND AND GERMANY, AMONG OTHERS

Western commercial protectionism also simultaneously causes a negative effect. Economic subsidises encourage European farmers and livestock producers to produce the goods that receive the highest subsidies. The result is surplus production of certain goods (linen, sugar and bananas, for example) at low prices. These surpluses soon flood the markets in Africa thanks to bilateral agreements with EU member states. This disloyal competition means that in any market in the Ivory Coast it is cheaper to purchase a kilo of rice from the Valencian Country than a kilo that is grown locally. It is impossible to compete against products that are sold for less than the cost of production and preparation. The result is more misery and a greater threat of social unrest in Sub-Saharan countries. The fields

are abandoned and rural communities become depopulated, young farmers head towards the cities and many end up living on the streets selling German biscuits and batteries for transistor radios. Crime rates increase alongside prostitution and the black market. Shantytowns spring up in the outskirts of Nairobi, Lagos and Dar es-Salaam, where sickness and sadness take hold. A new breed of rootless Africans have emerged throughout the continent as a result of Western protectionist practices. The suburbs are filled with farmers that have abandoned their homes in the countryside in order to live in a tin and corrugated iron shacks. Tribal chiefs without authority, medicine men that have lost their influence, broken families. In short, the disintegration of the traditional social fabric.

THE SOLUTIONS GO BEYOND THE AXIOM ‘MORE COOPERATION AND MORE TRADE’. THERE IS A NEED TO SIMPLY RETHINK ALL OUR RELATIONS WITH AFRICA

The steps taken against foreign products reach extremes when it comes to processed goods, the authentic *bête noire* of European local industry. This was the case with cashew nuts from Mozambique. It turned out that Maputo’s government discovered they could earn 150 euros more per tonne of processed cashews for export. To encourage local producers the ministry of agriculture imposed a tax on raw nuts destined for export. The European nut companies were up in arms and the World Bank forced Mozambique to withdraw its contentious tax by threatening to review development aid. The decision led to the total collapse of the processing industry: with the loss of more than 7,000 jobs in Mozambique, most of them held by women.

³ A sack contains 60 kilos of coffee

It is also the story of Ugandan coffee. Its beans, of the Robusta variety, are considered to be particularly exquisite and aromatic. For decades, its export represented more than half of the country’s GDP. That is until the European Union decided to impose buying conditions on all coffee originating in Africa, which essentially meant banning the use of chemical fertilizers. Coincidentally, the decision coincided with an increase in demand for quality coffee by European and North American consumers. Uganda got to work to assuage the bureaucrats in Brussels and by the end of the 90s it was producing nearly two million sacks³ of organic coffee. This did not mean its trials were over, however. The European Union periodically sends inspectors to confirm the requisites are being carried out, which is a complete waste of time, since the Ugandan farmers are forced to use local manure anyway, due to the extremely high price of chemical fertilizers. It is simply a delaying tactic to obstruct the arrival of coffee at a decent price in the markets in London and Paris.

Uganda is the continent’s second largest coffee producer after Ethiopia, but it is only allowed to export raw beans. The policy counts on the connivance of the great international food corporations. ‘I spoke to people from Nestle’, says Museveni, ‘and I demanded they come to Uganda to open a factory, but they refused, saying that we should stick to sending them the beans’. The fact is, a kilo of African coffee exports for less than a euro, but once roasted it retails for around 15 euros. The profits for the processing companies are massive, as are the lost profits of added value for the producers at the point of origin. With sales of unprocessed natural resources, Ugandans and Ethiopians give away to the Europeans the profits they could obtain for themselves if they

were to roast their own coffee or sell instant coffee. Too often we speak of how Western governments help Africa's development, when in fact the truth is the complete opposite: Africa is Europe's main donor. The 'black continent' is right now an enormous, generous aid agency dedicated to protecting the industrial fabric of the United Kingdom and Germany. It is a forced altruism that helps to maintain job stability in Holland, Ireland and Germany, among others. It is hard to admit that the profits given away by Africa are those that allow the EU to go ahead with expensive educational plans, or finance the agricultural subsidies enjoyed by farmers in France and Castille. In short, it allows the European Union to maintain the social order it has enjoyed since its foundation.

The EU has declared its commitment to help the development of the Third World for fifty years. So many years later, it has been demonstrated that its will is purely symbolic, just words that do not translate into real policies to tackle the factors that perpetuate the situation. Countries belonging to the EU conduct liberal economic policies with the economic giants of North America and Asia, but they do the reverse with Africa with their tariffs and trade restrictions, of a purely punitive nature. All the money which Brussels or Washington disburses in terms of development aid comes back in the form of profits from exports. Too often we say that Africa is poor to the extent that we have au-

tomatically internalised this viewpoint. Nevertheless, the truth is otherwise. The richest continents maintain Sub-Saharan Africa in an economic situation prior to the industrial revolution, confined to mono-cultures, obliged to export cheap, unprocessed, raw materials: bananas, fish, wood, tea and so on.

The economic formulas are without doubt more complicated. The solutions go beyond the axiom 'more cooperation and more trade'. There is a need to simply re-think all our relations with Africa and deal with its countries in a more horizontal way, as we do with China and Malaysia. They should be treated as equals, in a just, honest way, with an end to treating them as subordinates in both the economic and political sense. There is much more at stake than at first sight. Universal concepts such as equality and justice. A persistence of the 'donor' and 'receiver' relationship signifies perpetuating the connection between dominant regions and dominated regions.

Postscript: Yoweri Museveni ended his speech before the International Conference on African Development with a culinary recommendation for his Japanese hosts, 'we Africans have reared livestock for some 7,000 years and we know how to produce beef that is the same quality as yours, if not better. What is more, our cows have yellow fat, which is low in cholesterol. The Western protectionist regime is stopping different peoples of the world from enjoying mutual benefit'.

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