

## Seeds of fear sown in Uganda as farmers confuse clonal coffee with coronavirus

The emergence of the fast-spreading coronavirus and its virulent COVID-19 have come with unprecedented conspiracy theories related to source, cause and effects of the virus. While some of these are debatable, what isn't in dispute is the ignorance taking a toll on the most gullible. In Uganda, where high-yielding clonal coffee has been grown for over 30 years with big dividends to farmers and to the nation, some anti-science minds are spreading fear by confusing the word "clonal" with "corona" (virus). This has caused some gullible farmers to fear even going to their clonal coffee gardens, sources reveal. The confusion created around the pronunciation of the two words is reportedly being propagated in the coffee-growing parts of Busoga, where many farmers grow clonal plants developed from the shoots of a coffee tree rather than from seeds.

Reports emerged mid-March on social media from the Eastern region — a major robusta-grower — indicating that farmers had been misled to think that their clonal coffee was related to the virulent novel coronavirus currently killing hundreds of thousands of people across the world. This triggered fear and panic among some farmers.

Mzee Johnson Kato, chairman of Kamuli Citrus Farmers' Association and a coffee farmer, confirmed he had heard of the misleading rumors but quickly condemned them, saying he has grown clonal coffee and knows it very well for its great values and benefits.

"I've heard of those rumors that must be originated by illiterate people in the neighborhood of Kamuli. I cannot disassociate myself with this very useful and highly-productive coffee variety I've grown for over two decades because some confusing elements have associated it with coronavirus that just emerged last year on the world scene," Kato told the Alliance for Science.

He recalled that in the late 1980s, when clonal coffee was introduced by the late Dr. Israel Kibirige-Ssebunnya, the former state minister for agriculture who at that time was director of the Kawanda-based National Agricultural Research Laboratories Institute, false rumors circulated that clonal coffee trees wouldn't last long because they lacked tap-roots.

"But I got my first clonal coffee in 1997 — 23 years now — and it still flourishes," Kato said. "I have 15 acres which still exist. On top of fears that it wouldn't last long, perpetrators of anti-science rumors also alleged that it would easily succumb to droughts. Today, all these have been proven as empty lies."

### **Illiteracy and gullibility to blame**

He blamed widespread illiteracy and gullibility among farmers for creating fertile ground that allows the sowing and spreading of such negative campaigns. In the mid-1960s and mid-1980s, coffee and banana plantations were cut down and uprooted in several parts of Buganda as political activists of Kabaka Yekka (KY) clashed with those from the Democratic Party (DP). And when the UPC/Obote II Government was overthrown, plantations belonging to its ruthless local chairmen were also cut down.

Mzee Ntambi Mulijji, a prominent coffee farmer in the Mpigi District in central Uganda, said business rivalry is sometimes the source of the misleading rumors whereby one technology producer takes

advantage of a bad prevailing circumstance, such as coronavirus and COVID-19, to associate a rival variety in order to malign it.

“We witnessed that kind of name-calling of a crop-technology to cause fear of it just like they’re calling clonal coffee as corona today,” he recalled. “I adopted clonal coffee in 1987 when it was fully developed from research that began in 1960s by NARO. The late Dr. Ssebunnya and Dr. Musoli of the National Coffee Research Institute (NACORI) in Kituza, Mukono, were the key scientists behind clonal.

“It came onto the scene when an old conventional variety, that was already existing,” he continued. “A lot of entrepreneurs and scientists were dealing in the conventional coffee as a business, so they panicked when clonal coffee emerged on the scene. They crafted rumors that clonal does not last long in the field, and that it could not withstand droughts or dry spells. Today, it’s 33 years since I took on clonal, but it has survived all that time and on-and-off droughts. Thirty-three years is not a short time. Was the negative information about clonal, right? Not at all!” said Mulijji, a very progressive coffee farmer who serves as director in-charge of development at the National Union of Coffee Agri-business and Farm Enterprises (NUCAFE), a private sector umbrella body for coffee farmers’ organizations founded in 1995.

Mulijji, who also represents farmers on the state-run Uganda Coffee Development Authority (UCDA), the nation’s coffee regulator promotes new and more efficient technologies in communication, transport and agriculture. He runs a nursery that breeds coffee plantlets from clones and wants the UCDA to intervene urgently to stop the rumors.

“I’ll request UCDA management to debunk the anti-clonal coffee propaganda. This is a coffee that fetches for breeders and nursery operators UGX 1,500 per plantlet from NAADS [compared to just UGX300 for ordinary coffee seedlings]. In addition, clonal coffee yields highly, giving farmers handsome returns by not only allowing flowering phases on the same stalk, but also by producing big bean size that attract better prices than small coffee beans.”

## **Long history of propaganda**

He recalled that anti-clonal propagandists of the late 1980s also alleged it clonal varieties would kill the non-clonal coffees, without showing or explaining how.

“Clonal coffee ruffled a lot of feathers, but their negativity didn’t fail it,” Ntambi emphasised. “We have sustained it and it has hugely benefited Uganda.”

Today, Uganda earns over US\$450 million from coffee exports annually, which represents 20 percent of all exports.

Mzee Ntambi further revealed that farmers have cut down coffee trees in Butambala, a newer district recently carved out of Mpigi, to replace it with ginger.

“This spice is a more lucrative crop fetching UGX 200,000 per bag. One acre takes 8 kgs of seed, and on a higher side, yields 50 bags. So it gives UGX 1,000,000 an acre per season. That’s where there’s uprooting of coffee.” But he noted that such a shift “is not very wise” because coffee is a long-lasting

perennial crop that is in high demand and, unlike ginger, can be easily stored to help farmers take advantage of price fluctuations.

Giving his perspectives on the corona-clonal confusion, Michael J. Ssali, a coffee farmer in the Lwengo district of southern Uganda, suspects the rumors are due to business rivalry between dealers who trade in old coffee varieties and those that breed and market the newer and more popular clonal varieties.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s such fear-induced-confusion going on during this COVID-19-era. There are lots of rumors and misinformation making rounds with all manner of assertions on coronavirus and COVID-19 via social media,” he said. “We have anti-GMO and anti-vaxx activists posting their own COVID-19 related theories and forwarding all manner of those from outside Uganda to Facebook and WhatsApp platforms, most of them misleading.”

He condemned what he termed “anti-science propagandists” for sowing confusion relating clonal coffee to the corona virus.

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