ADVANCING

By **JOEL MILLMAN**

PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY CAA/RASHID CONTEH

AGRICULTURE

AFRICAN ENTREPRENEURS ABROAD ARE RETURNING TO PURSUE AGRICULTURE AND INVEST IN OPPORTUNITIES ON THE CONTINENT, PROVIDING SUBSISTENCE FARMERS WITH THE TECH TOOLS AND KNOW-HOW TO BRING CROPS LIKE FONIO AND CASSAVA TO THE WORLD'S TABLES.

Africa has an estimated 600 million hectares of uncultivated farmland, roughly 65% of the global total.

On a hungry planet that loses more farmland than it adds each year, Africa's potential as an agro-gold mine serves as a powerful lure to young farming entrepreneurs returning to the continent.

From Ghana to Guinea to The Gambia to Senegal to Sierra Leone, an agro-renaissance is stirring, fed to some degree by growing demand from diaspora consumers in Europe, North America and the Middle East.

It's also being supported by diaspora brain power, arriving in the form of skill transfers, access to finance capital and the unique knowledge expatriates share with each other when building bridges between ancient farming practices and modern markets.

Many of those expats bring strong backgrounds in business and academics — MBAs from the world's top universities — along with intimate knowledge of how family farming is practiced at home.

Consider the pastoral scene around a tiny rural crossroads called Mamou-Gongoré in Central Guinea.

As an autumn sun sets, men and women in flowing gowns cross a field of low grass, backs bent to the task of harvesting handfuls of seed pods from tufts that rise only to their ankles. As the men reach downward to swing their worn sickles, the women trail behind, clapping and murmuring to the rhythm of an overseer's chants.

"This is the work of fonio now. Fonio is good. Bring in the fonio," a tall man sings in the local Fulani dialect. He urges: "Bring It, Camara! Bring it, Diallo!" shouting out the names of the region's leading clans.

They are harvesting a Stone Age grain that is iron-rich and gluten-free, and which has sustained Fulani households for centuries. About 60% of the world's fonio is produced in Guinea and, until recently, was little known to consumers outside West Africa.

Today, it promises prosperity to farmers like Mamadou Balde, an elder in a village called Kouraba near Guinea's border with Senegal. Although miles from any electricity grid, villagers here enjoy watching international soccer on giant-screen TVs, thanks to the new solar panels stretching across the roofs of their mud-hewn cottages.

"Young people here prefer rice nowadays, but we old-timers like fonio," Balde says, adding that almost all Kour-

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Fonio is in vogue

aba's 70 farming families now are exporting their grain, thanks to Europe's strong demand. Balde proudly displays his village's new fonio warehouse, where freshly-harvested grain awaits shipment to Dakar, Senegal, for processing.

Recently, fonio has been in vogue as health-conscious foodies in Europe, Asia and North America have embraced the grain much as they once did quinoa from Perú and teff from Ethiopia. Celebrated by philanthropists like Bill Gates, it has garnered praise as "the drought-resistant super grain", or "one of the world's neglected and underutilized crops".

Fonio, available in specialty shops in the United States (U.S.) for $6 per kilo, has begun to replace rice in Tokyo sushi and barley in several specialty brews, appealing not only to the health-conscious but also to altruistic diners who target food budgets towards sustainable agriculture or "impact" investments.

And that's where the diaspora comes in.

The fonio harvested in Gongoré belongs to a cooperative, Groupement des Producteurs de Fonio au Foutah (GPFF), whose 85 members are being nurtured by a constellation of corporate allies in Europe and the U.S., mainly led by African expatriates who have banded together to help subsistence farmers bring fonio to the world's tables.

One player, Terra Ingredients, is based in Minneapolis in Minnesota, the U.S. Another, Telli Ventures, is based in Tromsø, Norway. A third, Compagnie Africaine Agroalimentaire (CAA), operates in Mali, Guinea, Senegal and Paris. Each of these allies relies on highly-trained African expatriates.

Osman Diallo of Telli Ventures is French, born of Guinean/Senegalese parents, who today lives in Norway. Malick Diedhiou of Terra Ingredients is Senegalese-German who works out of Amsterdam, and Laura Layousse of CAA is of Senegalese/Lebanese descent. All hold advanced degrees from European or American universities (often both). All speak at least three languages.

All have turned to fonio to advance farmers back home.

Besides its nutritional qualities, the grain has other attractions for impact investors. For one, it's grown almost exclusively in just a handful of impoverished states — Guinea, Mali, Senegal and Sierra Leone —which means aiding fonio cultivation puts cash directly in impoverished African households. Another reason: almost 80% of fonio production occurs on family plots, so investors are not automatically in league with big commodities' monopolists. Another benefit: few grains on earth are cultivated with such small amounts of water, which means fonio production doesn't require big investments in irrigation infrastructure, nor is there chemical contamination from irrigation runoff.

"It's usually not mechanized at all," says Diallo of Telli Ventures. "Something 'advanced', like having a tractor when planting seed of harvesting, can boost production enormously."

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Diedhiou of Terra Ingredients explains the average yield from cooperative members is 500 kilos per hectare, with farmers cultivating more than two hectares per harvest season. At today's prices, EUR0.55/kilo, that comes to just EUR275 ($285) per hectare per harvest, or about 10% of Guinea's average annual salary.

Mechanization, paradoxically, can be a money-saver for the farmer. That's because migration — either to nearby Senegal, or else to another continent — has begun to drain Guinea's rural workforce.

As farmers' sons and daughters leave for easier work in the city or abroad, the rising cost of hiring outsiders as day laborers cuts into farming profits. Thus, having corporate partners who can finance the purchase of modern machinery removes the obstacle of finding cash for a downpayment. It also frees more children from laboring in the fields.

To be sure, children well enough educated to forgo farm labor then compete for jobs far from home, which extends the cycle known as the 'Brain Drain'. This is not a small thing.

Dr Akinwumi Adesina, head of the African Development Bank, recently reported the number of African professionals living outside the continent has swollen over the past 30 years to over 20 million. He noted the $100 billion now remitted annually to Africa has become Africa's single greatest source of capital, exceeding direct foreign investment, philanthropy or local private sector investment.

While the Brain Drain contributes to rising remittance numbers, it also undermines development of core human capital that would advance Africa's skilled talent pool or replace talent that has left. Adesina noted that 70,000 skilled professionals are leaving Africa annually.

Yet the Brain Drain has its counterpoint, what some migration experts call "brain circulation", or the 'Brain Chain'. As debt indicators in Africa worsen, and sovereign risks increase, many African countries may attract diaspora investors who view investment opportunities in their countries of origin through a more favorable lens than institutional investors from the Global North.

That's the hope of countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Guinea, whose outbound migration has been prolific, and yet whose expatriates are well-positioned to invest savings held abroad in African opportunities they regard as true bargains.

Someone like Rashid Conteh, 54, who spent more than half his life in the United Kingdom (U.K.), starting as a student, then building a furniture manufacturing business. He returned to Africa in 2005 as a dual U.K./Sierra Leone citizen and as an exporter of his furniture line. That effort led him to study other opportunities and ways to profit from them.

If you ask the Kingston University London graduate today which obstacles he's had to overcome launching himself into local agriculture, prepare for a long answer.

He begins with "access to affordable financing", then adds "unreliable energy and high energy costs, access to clean drinking water, capacity building of middle management, poor road networks and a skills gap".

He looked first at rice.

"Sierra Leone imports $250 million in rice annually," Conteh explains, or nearly $1 million daily. Focusing on import-substitution, Conteh hoped to grow rice efficiently enough to replace what was arriving from abroad. Instead, he turned to cassava, a tuber grown in Brazil that can be milled into a pellet resembling rice, already a staple in Africa served under the names *attieke* and couscous in some places and as *garri* in Sierra Leone. "We discovered we had no competitive advantage growing rice, but plenty for *garri*," Conteh continues. He cites the 5.5 million hectares of arable land in the country, of which less than 6% currently is under cultivation.

Conteh's Sierra Agro-based Industries and Services launched in 2013 with just under $1 million in investment, raised from his furniture business. Today, the enterprise has grown from three employees to 45, says the CEO, "and, indirectly, hundreds more".

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That's because Conteh doesn't just produce cassava. He also produces cassava farmers, training locals to improve crop yields as they improved their skills. He began leasing heavy farming machinery, not only to defray the costs of running his own plantation, but also to familiarize subsistence farmers with tools to produce for a global market. He decided to transform harvested cassava into cassava flour to be rendered into pasta, which he now exports to neighboring Guinea and Liberia as well as Senegal and back to the U.K.

"From a humble beginning," Conteh says, "we have grown to become the largest cassava producer and processor in Sierra Leone," with a capacity to process 16 metric tons of cassava per day.

Similarly, efforts like fonio seem safe to an outsider.

Because the scale of production is so small, risks shrink to a very manageable size.

Consider the fonio processor, operational since 2022 in Dakar, that Layousse's CAA group installed at a cost of under EUR1.5 million ($1.55 million). It is considered the first attempt to mill this ancient grain industrially, handling 700 metric tons of fonio annually from some 1,500 farmers CAA has in its supply chain (two years ago, there were only 30 farmers shipping for processing).

In effect, the cost of amortization on that initial investment was EUR1,000 ($1,038) per farmer, an input cost that drops exponentially the longer the mill is operational.

"Before we had the plant, it was all manual and we had almost zero sales," says Diedhiou of Terra Ingredients. "Of course, we didn't go from 30 to 1,500 immediately, but it exploded [in 2024] because fonio starts to become more sought-after in the U.S."

Before CAA's machinery, fonio was as labor-intensive to de-husk as it was to plant and harvest. Women used wooden mortars and pestles to pound edible grain from a hard casing — and often lost much of its volume in dusty clouds of fonio. Exporting grain for processing not only means saving lost product, it also cuts the time spent turning raw grain into food. So, larger spring plantings and larger harvest yields followed.

CAA's success with its suppliers has encouraged at least one other diaspora enterprise, La Petite Damba, to match CAA's investment with a fonio processor of its own in Mamou, Guinea.

Fodé Youla, the son of Guinean diplomats, attended Northwestern University outside Chicago. Since 2016, he has been operating La Petite Damba as an exporter of several Guinean farm products.

Maarouf Barry, also the son of a Guinean diplomat, is, at 27, one of the younger expats returning to pursue agriculture. A dual citizen of the U.S. and Guinea, he was born in Boston and pursued his university studies at Wentworth Institute of Technology, a Massachusetts school with a strong emphasis on social change.

Sustainable agriculture drew Barry back to Western Guinea's Boké Region, where his late father — who had retired from the foreign service — was operating the family's palm oil plantation. Barry's vision was to bring low-impact farming techniques to his neighbors, training them in new methods of cultivation. He also demonstrated new financing opportunities most local farmers had never imagined: U.S. vehicles like GoFundMe, Close Farming and MassChallenge.

Barry spotted an opportunity in the diaspora itself: that there are affluent Africans who no longer live in Africa, but who represent a potentially lucrative market for African exports. "I saw in Boston there was a need for authentic palm oil," Barry explains. "It's like Italians with their olive oil. People abroad want the authentic item."

The effort is beginning to pay off. In 2024, he says Eleis Farm was a candidate for a $450,000 target grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), money Barry must match with other sources to access the entire grant.

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He's making progress. Eleis Farm has been exporting to a wholesaler in Rotterdam, Netherlands, who distributes Barry's brand to 16 European markets where Guineans live. In 2024, Barry approached 100 metric tons in exports, his best year yet.

Barry and his three brothers make no secret of the fact that they had a huge head start. His father's holdings, over 50 hectares incorporated in 2013 as Eleis Farm, offered him a platform and feedstock at practically no cost.

"The land and the palm trees came free. This is the legacy my father left for us," he says with a characteristic smile. "Now it is our turn to continue his vision."

Operationally, he says, his efforts are profitable. But in terms of matching his father's investment, he says, "I'm not even close."

But success isn't measured only on balance sheets. Eleis Farm is now part of a community of farmers who participate in 16 local cooperatives producing palm oil, cassava, salt, rice and fish for commercial sale.

There are 93 farmers in total, all Fulani speakers in the same region. "We were creating a bridge between small holder farmers and the diaspora," he says.