

THE DARK SIDE OF THE ITAL

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http://webapps.aljazeera.net/aje/custom/2014/italiantomato/video/total_intro.mp4

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Prince Bony never thought that he would travel across the desert and the sea only to find himself doing the same work that he used to do back home. Sitting in front of an abandoned farmhouse, a vestige of agrarian reform, he looks out upon the horizon and reflects on his life. Prince shares this makeshift home with a dozen other Ghanaian seasonal workers. Without papers, without money, without prospects, they have found refuge here in the open countryside, in this cluster of ruins that ironically bears the name “Borgo Libertà” (Liberty Borgo).



"In Ghana, they called me Kofi America, because I always yearned to travel. I wanted to conquer the world!"

Prince Bony - Ghanaian Worker

Wrapped up in an old, threadbare overcoat, Prince fixes his gaze on the sun as it sinks below the horizon. Then he says just one word:

“tomato”. No sooner has he said it than his face lights up, but it’s a light veiled in sadness. “Also in Navrongo, my town, we grow tomatoes!”



Deserted fields

Navrongo, Upper East Region, Ghana. Tomato fields, once overflowing, are now deserted. Producers have switched to growing other crops or abandoned their land.

Along the road that leads from Tamale to Navrongo, the pyramids of tomatoes shake as the lorries bearing empty boxes storm past, hurling at full speed down the route that links northern and southern Ghana. The noise of the engines, the honking of the horns and the rattling of the trailers drown out the shouts of the women who have artfully displayed their red wares for sale by the roadside. But it’s all in vain: nobody wants fresh tomatoes anymore.

These sellers have an air of desperation about them. On their stalls, the succulent tomatoes end up spoiling and going rotten. Now, customers only buy tins of Salsa, Gino and Obaapa, brands of tomato paste imported from Italy or China.

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<http://webapps.aljazeera.net/aje/custom/2014/italiantomato/index.html>

“There isn’t a dish in Ghana that doesn’t have tomato in it. But the tomatoes produced here don’t sell anymore.” Ayine Justice Atomsko, head of the small agricultural community of Veaa, has the doleful tone of someone who remembers another era. Only 20 years ago, tomato

farming was thriving in the Upper East region, this agricultural area in northern Ghana. Every farmer grew a couple of hectares of tomatoes, safe in the knowledge that they could sell them at a good price.



"I don't grow tomatoes anymore. I wouldn't know who to sell them to."

Aolja Tenitia - Farmer of the Year in 2007

But with the beginning of the 21st century, the manna turned into a curse. The failure of the Pwalugu processing factory, the strong competition from neighbouring Burkina Faso and especially the arrival of a wave of tinned tomato imports from Italy and China destroyed the dreams of the farmers in the region. "We have been betrayed," says Aolja Tenitia who had been appointed "Farmer of the Year" in 2007 and welcomed as an honoured guest at the Ministry of Agriculture and on state television in Accra. She had a thriving plot of land at the time. Today she is doing subsistence farming. Worn out from debt, having invested all their savings in seeds, fertilizer and land, a number of desperate cultivators took their own lives in 2007.

The tomato business could have been a gold mine.

Makola market, the main market in Accra – one of the largest in Western Africa – is the commercial heart of the capital. A veritable anthill where thousands of peddlers amass in a maze of narrow streets, cluttered with lorries loaded to the brim with every kind of load under the sun. Everywhere, wooden stalls seem to be laden down by red tins of tomatoes, skilfully balanced by the sellers in mysterious geometric formations. "Gino", "Salsa", "Fiorini", the brands are Italian pastes.

Italian brands work for tomatoes: even the Chinese product “Gino” displays the Italian tricolour on the tin to attract customers.



"I used to sell soups and fresh vegetables. Nowadays, customers only want tins."

Agnes Sewa - Seller at Makola market

“This Gino tin is the one that sells the most, but Salsa also sells well,” explains Agnes Sewa, a seller in front of her small, brightly-coloured stall. Over the years, Agnes has seen the gradual disappearance of the mountains of fresh fruit and vegetables from the market, replaced by tins of preserved tomatoes imported from far-flung places.

Watch the following Video link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoM0Negk3GI#t=70>

For Philip Ayamba, the Director of the Community Self Reliance Centre, an organisation closely associated with tomato producers, the government should have limited the quantity of tomato paste coming in from abroad. “If the market had been regulated, the farmers would’ve gotten better prices and would’ve had a market for their produce. But the government did the exact opposite. It swung open the doors of the country to imports of European tomato paste. Now there’s such a wide choice and such an amount of produce that it’s practically impossible to sell locally-grown tomatoes”.

TOMATO PASTE IMPORTS FROM ITALY TO GHANA

Thousands of tonnes of tomato paste produced in Italy are exported to Ghana every year. This has a negative impact on the local tomato production.

From 2000 onwards, the government reduced the customs duties on imports of certain products, including tomato paste, thus creating in the mid-term a deluge of foreign products in the local markets. FAO has calculated a rise of 650 percent in tomato paste imports from 1998 to 2003. During the same period, the share of Ghanaian tomatoes in the local market has plummeted from 92 to 57 percent. A drop that hasn't just hit tomato producers, but also the many spin-off sectors. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) estimates that 25 people are involved in the chain that brings a tomato from the field to the plate, including farmers, transporters, merchants, intermediaries, and owners of restaurants and chop bars.

Every year Ghana imports roughly 50,000 tonnes of preserved tomatoes. A succulent market that Italy had cornered until about 10 years ago, but now must compete for with China.

Massive importations of tomato paste from Europe have killed the local market

In the “Salsa” tomato paste processing plant, the tins cause a deafening racket as they pirouette down the conveyor belt. Workers busy at the wheels of forklifts load stacks of tins in cardboard boxes and into a container. “This leaves tomorrow for the Ivory Coast,” explains the director. “When my father founded the company in 1968 it produced 10,000 tins a day. An exceptional amount at the time,” says Angelo D’Alessio, the managing director of the Centro Esportazione Conservati company (CEC). “In Africa, up to 20 years ago, the tomato paste market was the exclusive domain of Italy.” Even today, the business survives because of the African market. All of the produce from this factory in Nocera Superiore, in the province of Salerno, is exported beyond the Mediterranean. By virtue of its leading brand, Salsa, the business has an annual turnover of between 20 and 30 million euros (\$27m to \$40.8m).

Watch the following Video link:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvhmZKpWM_U

“Italy is the second largest transformer and preserver of tomatoes after California, in terms of the quantity of fresh produce transformed,” chirps Giovanni de Angelis, Director of ANICAV, the National

Association for Industrial Producers of Vegetable Food Preserves. In 2013, the Italian processed-tomato industry exported 1,127 million tonnes of tomato paste, with a turnover of 846 million euros (\$1.15bn) in a market that saw 8.32% growth in one year, according to data gathered by Federalimentare.

TOMATO PASTE EXPORTING COUNTRIES TO GHANA

The import of Italian tomato paste in Ghana reached its maximum in 2007, with more than 29,000 tonnes. Among the countries exporting tomato paste to Ghana, Italy ranks second after China.

The heart of this “business” is in the centre-south, in the Napoli region, a strategic hub for processing and trade. On the docks of the Neapolitan port, containers loaded with tins of “Made in Italy” tomato paste depart each week for the four corners of the earth. The agricultural production itself has been moved down to Puglia, following the devouring of Neapolitan agricultural land that has come with rampant urbanisation. The Capitanata plain around Foggia, already an important area for grain cultivation, has now become the mine for this “red gold”.

I have never seen people live and work in such conditions, not even in Africa.

Red gold black blood



Italy

Borgo Libertà - Puglia, Southern

In the heart of the yellowish prairies of the Capitanata plain, which extends between the coast of the Adriatic Sea and the Gargano hills, articulated lorries loaded with crates of tomatoes race along badly-paved roads in the direction of Naples, raising clouds of dust as they go. There's a Wild West atmosphere that gradually gives way to a more African scenario. In single file, seasonal workers from Ghana, Mali, Senegal, approach their camps at the end of a blistering day's work. From the end of July to mid-October, thousands of them stopover in these camps in the south of Italy for the tomato picking season.

Paid off the books, the pay is not by hour but by task, €3.5 (\$4.75) for every 300-kilo chest, which works out to less than €20 (\$27) per day for punishing work; without work contracts or health coverage and at the mercy of the “caporali” – the intermediaries between the workers and their employers. If they get hungry at midday, they chew on a stolen tomato. In the evening, they trudge back to their camps, where they have been assigned a “bed”: a mattress in the open air or in a makeshift shack.

Watch the following Video link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BbglQV3EaHM#t=37>

“The invisible ones of the harvest” number in the thousands throughout southern Italy. Almost all of them have no papers, and they'll do anything to work. “Not even in Africa have I seen people living in such conditions,” protests Yvan Sagnet, a Cameroonian student who in 2010 organised the first strike by seasonal workers in the fields of Puglia. He now works for CGIL, the main Italian union, defending the rights of these migrant seasonal workers. Italy, the third largest agricultural producer after France and Germany, vies with Spain for first place in the production of vegetables. In the past 10 years, Italy has produced an average of 6 million tonnes of tomatoes per year ([FAOSTAT](#)). According to FAO, the exportation of concentrated Italian tomatoes was facilitated in 2001 by a reimbursement by the EU of 45 euros (\$61) for every tonne of product exported ([FAO](#)). But that's not all. Overall, according to Oxfam, the EU subsidises tomato production to the tune of approximately 34.5

euros (\$47) per tonne, a subsidy that covers 65% of the market price of the final product ([Oxfam](#)). But who in Brussels is aware of the paradox of subsidising an export product that dumps on local produce in Africa?



"During tomato harvesting season, I manage to send some money to my family in Ghana. But I can't go back home, nor can I tell them to join me here. I just can't tell them the hell I live in here in Italy."

Prince Bony - Ghanaian Worker

The story of Prince Bony is emblematic of this perverse mechanism. Sitting in front of his crumbling abode, which he'll soon have to leave as the roof is about to cave in, he doesn't know where his journey will take him next. An authentic modern-day Sisyphus, he seems condemned to pick tomatoes just as the son of Aeolus was forced to constantly roll his stone up to the mountain peak. But what Prince Bony doesn't know is that the yield from his undocumented labour in the tomato fields of southern Italy risks forcing the farmers of the Upper East region in northern Ghana to abandon their land: that same land that also once was his.