

Bananas in Africa

The Domestication of Bananas

Bananas were domesticated initially in Southeast Asia and have spread from there to all regions of the tropics. The trees are from 3 to 10 meters tall, and they produce multiple bunches of fruit each year. All bananas are of the genus *Musa*. Most edible varieties are either sweet bananas (*Musa sapientum*), which produce fruit that is commonly eaten raw, or plantains (*Musa paradisiaca*), which produce larger, starchy fruit that is cooked before eating. Plantains are boiled, fried, or dried and ground into flour. Botanists divide plantains into two groups or varieties: "Horn plantains" and "French plantains." (A third group of plantains exists mainly in Polynesia.)

The Spread of Bananas in Africa

Historians presume that bananas and plantains arrived on the Indian Ocean coast of Africa in the first millennium C.E., through the voyages of Austronesian-speaking settlers who became dominant in Madagascar, but perhaps also through merchants from India.

Bananas seem to have spread into Africa along two or three routes. Bananas spread from the coast of Tanzania and Kenya to the highland areas of East Africa, and from Mount Kilimanjaro through the regions known today as Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda. They also spread up the Zambezi River Valley and to the low-lying and forested areas of Central Africa. In this immense area, plantains tended to replace yams as the staple food. In a third case, bananas spread inland from the coast of the Horn of Africa into Ethiopia.

As historian Christopher Ehret argues, bananas came to Africa through long-distance navigation, but spread in Africa by local contacts: "Within the continent, where the effects of the Commercial Revolution were not strongly to operate until very recent centuries, the new crops diffused the old-fashioned way, from community to neighboring community wherever the climate allowed."

The Impact of Bananas in Three African Regions

The region of the upper Nile Valley in modern Uganda and Congo (shown on the accompanying map as the "area of greatest variety") became an extraordinary center of banana cultivation. Perhaps because bananas arrived there from several directions, or because it has favorable soil, this area became a center for

developing new varieties. Both sweet bananas and plantains were developed into dozens of new varieties, prepared in numerous ways, and became the principal source of calories.

East and south of this center, in the highland areas of East Africa, sweet bananas are grown in profusion, along with plantains. West of this center is the equatorial forest of Central Africa (in Congo-Kinshasa, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, and parts of Cameroon, Central African Republic, and Angola). In this region, plantains provided a highly productive crop that could be grown on lands where yams did not grow well.

Historian Jan Vansina imagined the spread of plantains through the forest as follows:

Gradually yams were ousted as the staple over most of the area. Farmers could now settle everywhere and populations increased faster, to the growing inconvenience of the hunter-gatherers. Clashes between them and the farmers therefore increased over time. The farmers now easily produced food surpluses for exchange with hunter-gatherers and fisherfolk in return for their products.

By this same process, bananas and plantains spread all the way to the forested coastal area of West Africa, where sweet bananas became a popular fruit.

Somewhat before the arrival of bananas in Eastern and Central Africa, iron technology arrived in the same regions. Together, during the course of the first millennium C.E., these two new technologies (cultivation of bananas and iron mining and forging) provided the people of these African regions with a much higher level of productivity. With a higher level of economic output resulting from an expanded food supply and improved tools, it was possible for societies to make changes in their social, political, and cultural lives.

