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## The Origins and History of the International Society for Tropical Root Crops

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### ABSTRACT

The historical process leading to the International Society for Tropical Root Crops (ISTRC) began in 1964, in Trinidad. A group within the University of the West Indies conceived the holding of a series of crop-oriented symposia, and in view of local relevance, "Tropical Root Crops" was selected as the first topic. This was accepted by the University early in 1965; the meeting, originally scheduled for April 1966, was actually held in April 1967. This Symposium brought together many hitherto isolated workers from many countries and was a great success. A strong feeling emerged that continuity must be established: a Continuing Committee was formed, with a sub-Committee to start the Newsletter, and an offer from the University of Hawaii to host a Symposium 3 years ahead, accepted.

This 2nd Symposium was held in August 1970; during it a Constitution was formally adopted, and ISTRC came into existence as a legal entity, the late Dr. M.L. Magoon being its first President. The 3rd Symposium was held at the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in Nigeria in December 1973, when the writer was elected President, and a commitment made by the Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (CIAT), Colombia to host the 4th Symposium. The latter meeting took place in August 1976, and Dr. D.L. Plucknett elected President. Again, a commitment was made for the hosting of the 5th Symposium at Manila in the Philippines. This was realized in September 1979. All these three later Symposia, attracting different international participation, were also successful.

### Introduction

At the Manila Symposium in 1979, our President asked me to prepare a history of the Society, feeling that, 16 years on, there was need for a permanent record of what took place in those early days, especially for those who did not attend the earlier meetings. I was very pleased to accept, especially as I am the only person who, by good fortune, has attended all the Symposia held.

Events leading to the formation of ISTRC date back to the mid-1960's, a very different era from the present. Many tropical countries were only emerging from long periods of colonialist/imperialist domination, and tropical agricultural science was still greatly influenced by the socio-cultural hegemonism of the European/North American world. Its efforts were thus oriented largely towards

export cash crops, and food crops in general were largely neglected. Tropical root crops in particular, perceived as inherently alien by the expatriate or overseas-trained scientists and administrators, were even more neglected than other food crops. Only small cadres of indigenous scientists had emerged, many were still young and inexperienced; had received their scientific education in Europe or North America, largely unrelated to the problems of the tropics. Some useful work had been done, but depended on the enthusiasm of a few rare individuals, working in isolation. Research on root crops received little formal encouragement, and sometimes encountered substantial opposition. Much was never published, or appeared only in reports of limited circulation. Only two International Agricultural Research Institute (IARI's) existed, and neither had root crop interests.

It is therefore not surprising that the concept of an international meeting, or a permanent organization to unite tropical root crop workers, had not developed earlier. Mention should, however, be made of two earlier meetings. The *Congres du manioc et des plantes féculeuses tropicales des territoires de l'Union française*, was held in Marseille, France, in September 1949. Its delegates were all from the Francophone world and it was mainly limited to cassava. The Taro Conference of 1965 in Hawaii dealt with a single crop; and was attended only by delegates from the Pacific Basin and the USA, mainly Hawaii. Neither of these meetings led to on-going efforts to improve communications in the world of tropical root crops.

#### Antecedents and the First Symposium, St. Augustine, Trinidad

The initiatives that led to the Society's formation were taken in the Caribbean, mainly Trinidad. In the early 1960's, the new University of the West Indies was establishing its identity, and the School of Agriculture particularly, inheriting the traditions of the former Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture dating back to 1921, was well placed to make its mark in the Caribbean. An informal group in the University, including Dr. J.A. Spence, Mr. P.H. Haynes and Dr. L.A. Wilson, conceived the holding of a series of scientific meetings, modelled on the Easter Schools of the University of Nottingham, but on an essentially Caribbean basis. Most fortunately, the theme "Tropical Root Crops" was selected for the first meeting, and accepted by the University in February 1965:

"Because of the importance of the starchy roots and tubers as food in tropical countries and the emphasis placed by the University on relevant research, it was considered highly desirable that an attempt be made to collate existing information on these crops in order to identify gaps in our knowledge, make plans to fill these and also establish bases for practices aimed at economically expanding production and utilization"

and the meeting scheduled for April 1966. An Organizing Committee was set up and a circular letter was distributed widely, from which I quote:

"A symposium on 'Tropical Root Crops' is being organized by the School of Agriculture of the University of the West Indies during the Easter recess of 1966. It will be held at St. Augustine and is scheduled for 27th March to 2nd April. The purpose of the symposium is to review existing knowledge of the common starchy 'roots' grown in the tropics for food and to define paths that may, with advantage, be followed in future investigations. The main emphasis will be on topics of basic importance to root crop production."

Because of the absence of certain key members of the Organizing Committee in 1966, and to give more time for publicity, the Symposium was finally held at St. Augustine, 2nd to 8th April, 1967. Participants numbered 157 from 30 countries, and 56 papers were read. There was, naturally, a preponderance of delegates from the Caribbean, but the Symposium was truly international. Participants were welcomed to Trinidad by the Hon L.M. Robinson, Minister of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries, and to the University by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Dr. H.D. Huggins. The symposium was an unqualified success - not least perhaps on account of the generous, traditionally West Indian, hospitality that followed Dr. Huggins' timely reminder of the definition of a Symposium: "a convivial meeting for drinking and intellectual entertainment." There was an elegant sufficiency of both.

The Symposium took place at what can now be seen as one of the cruces of history; everywhere tropical root crop workers were realizing the importance of their crops, and the need for improved communication and recognition. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the same year saw the publication of the nomothetic paper "Choice of food crops in relation to actual and potential production in the tropics" by de Vries, Ferweda and Flach, and my own definitive monograph on yams: almost for the first time, major contributions on tropical root crops were being made to the "respectable" scientific literature. The Plenary Session of the Symposium reflected the spirit of the age: in a long meeting, many ideas were enthusiastically protagonized. Eventually, it was unanimously decided that a similar Symposium should be held in a few years' time, and the location of Hawaii suggested; that a Newsletter should be established; that attempts should be made to establish a Root Crop Information Centre; and most important, that a Continuing Committee should be set up to ensure publication of the Proceedings - which eventually appeared in 1969--and to co-ordinate other matters of interest. During the next three years this Committee laid the foundations for the formation of ISTRC.

#### The Second Symposium, Hawaii: Formal Constitution

The suggestion had been made at Trinidad, by Dr. E.E. Trujillo of the University of Hawaii, that a second Symposium could be hosted there, a few years on. This, in fact, came to pass, although unfortunately Dr. Trujillo was away from Hawaii at the time. However, his absence brought our retiring President, Dr. D.L. Plucknett, into a situation where he took over local arrangements for the Symposium, and having thus become involved in ISTRC's affairs, he has continued to influence and assist the Society in many different ways. The Symposium was held 23rd to 29th August, 1970, at the Ala Moana Hotel in Honolulu, although many facilities were arranged by Dr. Plucknett's Department of Agronomy of the University. It was smaller than that at Trinidad, perhaps because of the size of the Pacific Basin, from which many delegates were drawn, and the correspondingly high cost of air fares: while for delegates from other areas, Hawaii was very much on the "other side of the world," and the cost of attendance even higher. Nevertheless, 75 delegates were present, representing 25 countries, and a technically very useful meeting held. A feature of the Symposium was that, although most of the meetings were held in Honolulu, the group migrated for the last two days to the more relaxed surrounding of the island of Kauai. Here, delegates were released from the pressures of Honolulu, and were able to see the production of taro (*Colocasia* spp.) being conducted both in the traditional Polynesian system, and also with modern innovations. Other crops were discussed at the Symposium, but there was some concentration on taro, in view of its importance in the Pacific. The first volume of the Proceedings, containing the invited papers, was already published and was handed out to delegates on arrival.

Between Trinidad and Hawaii, it became clear in correspondence and meetings between members of the Continuing Committee, that there was need for some permanent form of association, and the concept of forming an International Society emerged. During this period, I drew up a first draft for a Constitution, which, after some modifications by others on the Continuing Committee, was presented to the Plenary Session at Hawaii. After lengthy debate, it was unanimously agreed that an International Society for Tropical Root Crops should be formed, and after some further modifications, the Constitution was formally accepted. Elections to the various offices were held: Dr. M.L. Magoon of the Central Tuber Crop Research Institute (CTCRI) in India, at that time the only specialist root crop institute in the world, became the Founder President. Thus was the Society formed. Even at the time, the Hawaii meeting was referred to as the "Second Symposium" - as though the Society had been formed retrospectively at Trinidad!

### The Third Symposium, Ibadan, Nigeria: Consolidation

It was suggested by the President, Dr. Magoon, that the next Symposium should be held in India, but some difficulties developed and after a working visit by the Secretary, Mr. Haynes, to the newly-formed International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA) at Ibadan, Nigeria, this latter location appeared more appropriate. After negotiations between officers of the Society and IITA Management, it was agreed that the 3rd Symposium should be held there. Nigeria, as the world's largest producer of yams, and third largest producer of cassava, and the most populous country in Africa, ensuring good attendance by local delegates, seemed a most suitable venue.

The Symposium was held at IITA, from 2nd to 9th December, 1973. It was attended by 125 delegates, 57 from within Nigeria, the others from 31 countries widely spread across the world: a truly international gathering. Many technically valuable papers were presented and discussed, and a major achievement was the establishment of contacts between African workers with those in Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere, often for the first time. Conceptual thinking about root crops was starting to undergo a radical change from that which had prevailed in the 1960's, when the Trinidad Symposium was being planned. A substantial program on cassava had been initiated, supported largely by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC), at the Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (CIAT) and a related program, of especial relevance to African conditions, especially African mosaic, at IITA. This Institute also had global responsibility, within the network of IARI's for work on yams. Other funds were also becoming available for work on tropical root crops, and it was no longer so professionally "disreputable" to have interests in the field. It was against this background, and that of a high level of invited and presented papers, that a most successful Symposium was held, although it was unfortunate that the President was unable to attend. A number of participants were sponsored financially by the IDRC, and others by USAID.

For the first time, there was no doubt as to where the next Symposium would be: an offer came from IITA's Latin American counterpart, CIAT, early in the meeting, which was accepted with alacrity. The Plenary Session discussed the Constitution in considerable detail, and changes were made, notably the addition of a third position of Vice President, with especial responsibility for the coming Symposium (Dr. Alvarez-Luna, of CIAT, was naturally appointed), while it was also resolved that definite commitments to locations for coming Symposia would always be made in future. In Dr. Magoon's absence, I had the honour to be elected President for the next triennium. This Symposium served firmly to establish ISTRC

in the world of tropical agriculture. The only problem that arose was the long delay in the appearance of the Proceedings, which were published only after those of the 4th Symposium!

#### The Fourth Symposium, Cali, Colombia

Much activity took place in the period between the Ibadan and Cali meetings: CIAT was rapidly building up its cassava program, which opened opportunities for many to visit CIAT, and to interact with the very competent local Organizing Committee.

When the meeting was held, 1st to 7th August, 1976, the excellent local arrangements made were immediately evident, even though, most unfortunately, Dr. Alvarez-Luna had recently left CIAT. The physical resources of CIAT - possibly architecturally the pleasantest research station in the world - made it possible for many participants to live on campus, and provided an excellent environment for both work and relaxation. Together with the many attractions of neighboring Cali, this went far to make the Symposium an interesting and enjoyable one: the closing reception and banquet, I recall, was one of the finest social occasions I have attended. Technically, the meeting was a great success, and most presentations were of a high standard, thanks to a careful editing policy adopted by the local committee. Attendance was the highest and most international of all the Symposia held so far, with 172 participants from 43 countries, although there was naturally a predominance (50) of Colombians. A number of the overseas participants were supported by IDRC and USAID and further most useful assistance was given by IDRC by providing professional editors who attended the Symposium, collected papers, edited them and published the Proceedings in record time - well inside a year from the Symposium.

Offers to host the next Symposium were received from both India and the Philippines (where a National Root Crop Research Centre had recently been established) and the Council recommended acceptance of the latter, which decision was ratified by the Plenary Session. Dr. D.L. Plucknett was elected as President.

#### The Fifth Symposium, Manila, Philippines

For the second time, there had been no doubt as to where the Symposium was to be held, and there was the advantage that the active new Secretary was a Philippine national, and Director of the Philippine Root Crop Research and Training Centre (PRCRTC). The Centre being in a rather remote location in Leyte, and having somewhat limited facilities, the main part of the Symposium was held in Manila, at the Philippine Village Hotel, which provided good conference facilities, and accommodated all the delegates together. Valuable assistance in organization was provided by the Philippine Council for Agricultural and Resources Research (PCARR). The Symposium, held 17th to 21st September, 1979, was only slightly smaller than the 4th, with 129 participants from 38 countries, and again a strong editorial policy assured a high standard in papers presented. A feature of the Symposium was its association with a Workshop on Taro supported by the International Foundation for Science (IFS), primarily for its own grantees working on the crop in South East Asia and the Pacific Basin. This Workshop was actually held at PRCRTC but the delegates attended the main Symposium as well. The attendance was thus broadened, and a strong representation of taro workers ensured, while at the same time an interesting post-Symposium tour was provided for many delegates.

The Plenary Session went smoothly, with Dr. Plucknett re-elected as President, together with a balanced selection of Council members. Offers to host the next Symposium were received from India and the Centro Internacional de la Papa (CIP), Peru, and in view of the two former unsuccessful attempts to meet in India, the former was accepted. However, various problems at CTCRI would have rendered difficult the holding of a meeting there, and a new approach was made to CIP, who most kindly agreed, at a rather late date, to host the present meeting.

### Other Activities

The main function of ISTRC has been to ensure that regular Symposia are held, and it has been the policy of successive Councils to hold Symposia in geographical locations spread widely about the tropical world, to gather as many workers as possible into the fold. It follows, therefore, that once a Symposium has been held in a particular region, there is unlikely to be another for many years to attract the same regional participants. After the 3rd Symposium in Nigeria, a number of people conceived the formation of an African Branch: many of these came together at a horticultural conference in Kumasi, Ghana the following year, and developed ideas further, eventually to crystallise after the (Nigerian) 1st National Seminar on Root and Tuber Crops held at the National Root Crop Research Institute (NRCRI), Umudike, 21st to 25th March, 1977. The Branch was formally constituted in June, 1978, the names of Dr. B.N. Okigbo and Dr. E.R. Terry being much concerned with its formation. A Regional Symposium was held 8th to 12th September, 1980 at Ibadan, and another meeting is scheduled for Douala, Cameroon in September 1983. There have also been suggestions since the 5th Symposium in Manila, that a South East Asia Branch might be formed, although formal steps have not been taken. Such regional Branches are welcome, as a way of extending the aims of the Society "to stimulate the efficient production and utilization of tropical root crops and to improve knowledge of these crops by dissemination of information." Although it is an entirely separate legal entity, it may be appropriate here to mention the Indian Society for Tropical Root Crops, which was founded by a former Director of CTCRI, Dr. N. Hrishii, and which is affiliated to ISTRC.

The other important activity of ISTRC is the publication of the Tropical Root and Tuber Crops Newsletter. The first issue appeared in January 1968, less than a year after the Trinidad Symposium, edited by Dr. J. León of the Instituto Interamericano de Ciencias Agrícolas (IICA). To quote from the Editorial:

"During the International Symposium on Tropical Root Crops, held at the University of West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, last April, it was agreed to establish a tropical root crops newsletter. Its main purpose is to facilitate communication among the persons working in genetics and breeding of these crops, as well as on allied fields."

Subsequently, the Newsletter broadened its scope to cover all aspects of tropical root crop studies. For many years, it was edited by Dr. Martin of the Mayaguez Institute of Tropical Agriculture, Puerto Rico, who thus performed a great service to ISTRC, while the last two issues were edited from the University of Hawaii. In all, 12 issues have appeared in the 16 years since Trinidad, the last in 1982, although the original aim was that it should be annual.

## Conclusion

The 16 years since Trinidad have seen a great change in tropical agriculture and root crops are by now far more generally accepted as important, and very substantial international and national funding is now being given, especially for work on cassava. Three IARI's; CIP, CIAT, and IITA have very substantial root crop programs, while in addition to India, Nigeria, Togo, Brazil and the Philippines now have specialized root crop institutes. Work in the area has proliferated in the greatly increased numbers of Universities and research institutes around the tropical world, although much still remains to be done. It is difficult to quantify how far these changes have been brought about by ISTRC's activities, but its function in creating a world community of tropical root crop workers, and the many contacts, collaborations and indeed personal friendships that have been formed at its Symposia, have surely played a major part.

	<u>1970/1973</u>	<u>1973/1976</u>	<u>1976/1979</u>	<u>1979/1982</u>
President	M.L. Magoon (India)	D.G. Coursey (U.K.)	D.L. Plucknett (U.S.A.)	D.L. Plucknett (U.S.A.)
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	J. León (FAO)	P.H. Haynes (Trinidad)	H.D. Thurston (U.S.A.)	H.D. Thurston (U.S.A.)
	-	D.L. Plucknett (U.S.A.)	J. Madamba (Philippines)	L. Degras (France)
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	D.L. Plucknett (U.S.A.)	F.W. Martin (Puerto Rico)	B.N. Okigbo (Nigeria)	A. Montaldo (Venezuela)
	-	B.N. Okigbo (Nigeria)	L.A. Wilson (Trinidad)	E.R. Terry (IITA)
	-	L.A. Wilson (Trinidad)	-	T.U. Ferguson (Barbados)
	-	-	-	R.S. de la Peña (U.S.A.)

\* S. Sadik (CIP) after 1981.