

THE COMPARATIVE ETHNOBOTANY OF AFRICAN AND ASIAN YAM CULTURES

D.G. Coursey

SUMMARY

Yam cultivation is postulated to have its origin in mesolithic times when a cultural continuum existed from New Guinea to Africa, before the development of the countries of origin of grain crops further north during the neolithic period. That the greatest subsequent development of yam-based cultivars occurred at the extremes of this continuum is attributed to later inter-actions with the respective grain-based civilizations of the Far and Near East. Man himself is conceived as being domesticated by his crops, and yam-based cultures are more in harmony with their ecosystems whereas grain-based cultures are more interventionist.

RESUME

On situe l'origine de la culture d'igname aux temps mésolithiques quand un continuum culturel s'était établi entre la Nouvelle Guinée et l'Afrique avant le développement des pays où les plantes à graine avaient leur origine en allant plus au Nord pendant la période néolithique. Le fait que des cultivars ayant pour base l'igname se soient par la suite développés à grande échelle aux extrêmes de ce continuum est attribué aux interactions ultérieures avec les civilisations de l'Extrême et du Proche Orient qui ont pour base la culture des plantes à graine. On considère que l'homme lui-même est domestiqué par les plantes qu'il cultive et les cultures basées sur l'igname sont plus en harmonie avec leurs écosystèmes alors que les cultures basées sur les graines sont plus interventionnistes.

BESUMEN

Se postula que el cultivo del ñame tiene sus orígenes en la época mesolítica cuando existía un medio cultural ininterrumpido desde Nueva Guínea a Africa, antes del desarrollo de los países donde se originaron los cultivos de grano — más al norte — durante el período neolítico. Se atribuye a posteriores interacciones con las respectivas civilizaciones del Lejano y Medio Este basadas en los cereales, que el grandioso desarrollo subsecuente de cultivares basados en el ñame haya ocurrido en los extremos de ese medio continuo. El hombre mismo se concibe como domesticado por sus cultivos y las culturas basadas en el ñame están más en armonía con sus ecosistemas; en tanto que las culturas basadas en los cereales, son más intervencionistas.

INTRODUCTION

If there is to be concern with the present status of root crop production in the world, and with the development of such production in the future. It is appropriate also to try to understand something of the past. Agricultural science developed in Western Europe and hence has been influenced by European modes of thought: these in turn were influenced by cultural concepts ultimately derived from the so-called 'Neolithic Revolution' of South-Western Asia of 7 to 10 millenia ago, where propagated grain crops and a number of animal species, but not vegetatively propagated root crops, were domesticated. Various authors^{7,16,39} have drawn attention to the interpenetration that has occurred between scientific thought and the folk ethnocentrism of Western Europe, and to the confusion generated by this that arises when tropical food production systems are being considered.

One outcome of this interpenetration of ideas is the frequent supposition that a non-grain-using, or a pre-grain-using culture is at a low order of evolution. Nevertheless, in connection with the cultivation of yams there are two major areas in the world to which, quite independently, the term "la civilisation de l'igname" has been applied. The first of these is that part of West Africa between central Ivory Coast and the Cameroun where root crops, especially yams, are the dominant staples^{14,18,31}. The other is that part of the Indo-Pacific, mainly Melanesia, but extending also into Micronesia and Polynesia, where yams and other vegetatively propagated crops are important²². Yam cultivation in the Pacific area has been considered in detail by Burkill^{8,9} and by Barrau^{4,5,6,7}.

*Tropical Products Institute, 56/62 Gray's Inn Road, London