

From the Standpoint of an Ethiopian Plant: Reflections upon *Radical Sustainability*

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Introduction

The landscape of my ethnography has been dominated by a root tuber perennial crop [*Ensete ventricosum* (Welw.) Cheesman] which is endemic to Ethiopia. Cultivation practices and culinary patterns characteristic of ensete mirror those for other so-called minor, orphan or underutilized crops which receive little or no attention from research networks, though they play an important role in regional food security. These plants are few, are likely to be perennial garden crops, and, significantly, are tended by women.

The exploration which I have pursued of the life and decline of this virtuous and intelligent plant (and of its human companions) has been guided by a theoretical interest in the concepts of food security, biocultural diversity, and sustainability. However, my approach was to tackle such broad questions by intersecting them with categories that have emerged from my original fieldwork.

The political ecology of ensete agriculture offered to me a strategic entry point into the extended family of perennials. A proximity to perennials has subsequently opened up a reflection upon their potential for becoming active components of a food-secure national landscape. This reflection, in turn, triggered a reconsideration of how ecological combinations that include perennials quietly turn upside-down a farm-centric view of agriculture to make room for alternative spaces (home gardens) and visions of agriculture and sustainability.

The case of ensete is made here to highlight the synergies of a landscape that is ecologically and culturally sustainable. I do so by asking the following question:

- ❖ What are the messages that this particular case study articulates and leaves to us as a durable legacy for further reflection on and good practice of sustainability?

Methods

This contribution draws from my latest book—*The Edible Gardens of Ethiopia. An Ethnographic Journey into Landscapes of Beauty and Hunger*—which is based on more than ten years ethnographic research in Southwestern Ethiopia. Here I will present only a small sample of the empirical data I have co-produced with farmers by taking part in their daily activities and learning from them. Information and insights at the local scale were gained through a variety of approaches—food diaries, participant and household observation, transect walks, semi-structured and key informant interviews.

Results

The most relevant points of this exploration into the ensete garden are as follows:

- ❖ There are traits of root and tuber crops that carry particular weight in shaping human-plant interactions, and may have had a considerable impact on the development of human societies—including the forms of settlement, economy, diet, and social organization.
- ❖ Certain forms of agriculture contain an appreciation of aspects beyond productivity and profitability; are capable of creating abundance from scratch; and aim at realizing wealth in novel ways, namely through valuing renewable resources in the landscape.
- ❖ The active role and ecological stewardship of African small farmers is instrumental in shaping alternative visions of nature and in 'doing' communities of food, agriculture, and cultural identity in the face of climatic and environmental changes.
- ❖ A novel assessment is overdue of what perennial root and tuber crops are, how they differ from annual seed staples, and what the implications of this dichotomy are for human social organization and sustainability.

Discussion and Conclusions

The *longue durée* of ensete cultivation has several implications for rethinking sustainability but here I will retrieve two threads: one has to do with its perenniality, the other with its rootiness.

'Perenniation'—the integration of trees and perennials into fields inhabited by other food crops—has recently emerged as a key strategy in improving land. However, perennials still hold low value in most programs for food crop improvement, where indeed the characteristic of perennality has been neglected or removed through selection for yield. As a result, over time, the role of perennials in food production has diminished. Moreover, the depreciation of specific diets and crops entails that those who produce and procure such foods, the majority of whom are women, are cast down into the same lower status assigned to indigenous crops and food patterns, and are bound under the common stigma of backwardness and poverty. While perennial crops may seem incidental when viewed from a global food security perspective, many are regionally important for subsistence and for research.

Much can be said about smart strategies of coping with and adapting to socio-ecological events from the vantage point of those (both humans and plants) who are 'rooted'. Yet, contrary to grains which are cultivated in open fields and can be easily counted, stored, transported and sold in the market, edible roots and tubers are generally grown and consumed on small farms, thrive in intercropped patches behind the house (home gardens), and remain undercounted or not even measurable. Information gathered at the regional or country levels is likely to underestimate, or not to grasp at all, the political, ecological, and economic complexity of a 'simple' edible garden. This gap is particularly alarming if we consider that root and tuber cultivation systems have more ecological stability than grain systems, and may even be exploited to achieve overall environmental sustainability.

Unmemorable roots, or less glamorous edible perennials, languish in obscurity, and yet they are essential to the daily nourishment of vast numbers of people. The fact that certain crops are remembered and others are forgotten has direct consequences for fields and bodies, for physical and social landscapes.

In an epoch of aggressive commodity marketing on a global scale, I therefore ask: can a focus on the interstitial spaces of tiny garden plots be a revolutionary move in fostering regenerative and sustainable food systems? How could perennality and rootiness build on a model for sustainable livelihoods in a transformational time?

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