

PART 1. INTRODUCTORY

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A. The Spread of Yam Cultivation.

The history of the yam crop is essentially the same as that of many other tropical crops inasmuch as one can trace the development of a specialised type of plant requiring specialised methods of treatment from a wild forest plant known only to a few native tribes. To-day the yam constitutes one of the most important food crops in the humid tropics. It is curious to note, however, that it probably had its origin amongst the hill-people of the Eastern Tropics, races who normally subsist on a grain diet. The uncertainty of their rice crop in certain seasons led them to seek for a substitute in the forest; the wild yam was found, its "good" qualities gradually realised, and eventually ~~be~~ put to permanent use as a "famine food". Little evidence of the wild plant being utilised in West Africa is available, but the occurrence of wild species there, and the preponderance of root crops in the natural diet of the natives to-day suggests that this was probably the case. Nevertheless, the two great races of yams, which are the principal sources of the food at present - the Greater and the Lesser Yams - are both of Asiatic origin (4,5), and it is to the evolution and migrations of these that one has to look for evidence of the spread of the yam, as a cultivated crop, to all parts of the world.

From China, Malay, and other parts of the Far East the yam spread westwards to Persia, the Near East, and Mauritius - chiefly in the ships of Malayo-Polynesian traders who used it to provision their exploratory voyages. From Mauritius it reached East Africa, where it was not previously known; and from the Near East it extended to parts of Europe - in particular Spain and Portugal. West Africa probably received it independently of East Africa, that is - directly by sea. There the yam was already known (the precursor of our present-day Guinea yams), but in course of time the introduced Asiatic species found preference in many parts and eventually replaced the indigenous varieties where the climate was suitable.