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“Solidarity in a competing world —
fair use of resources”

The Role of Edible Aroids in the Elimination of Hunger and Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Aroids or taro (L. Araceae) are the world's most ancient food crops. Their antiquity and central role in agriculture and food cultures is underlined by the symbolic meaning and cultural value of the plants, plant parts and numerous dishes. Since times immemorial, aroids have been maintained in a wide range of agro-ecologies. In the tropics, elephant ear (L. *Alocasia*); elephant foot yam (L. *Amorphophallus*) and swamp taro (L. *Cyrtosperma*) are of importance, but taro (L. *Colocasia*) and tannia (L. *Xanthosoma*) are the most widely cultivated and consumed aroids. All plant parts are eaten and nutritious, but they are foremost cultivated for their starchy underground parts.

In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) taro and tannia are important food crops and wild-harvested plants that make a valuable contribution to the rural and urban diet. Although the scope and scale of cultivation for local and home consumption is unknown, it is estimated that SSA accounts for three-quarters of the global production of taro and tannia roots and tubers, often referred to as cocoyams. Because they are mostly grown by small and subsistence farmers that rely on infertile and marginal soils for food, income and employment, cocoyams are often nicknamed a food security and poor man's crops.

Currently most of the world's poorest nations are located in SSA, a region faced with chronic food insecurity, climate change, loss of biodiversity and soil degradation. Even though cocoyams grow well in marginal, often harsh and complex environments not well suited for intensive agriculture and conventional staple crops such as wheat, corn and rice, schemes to address a fair use of resources hardly incorporate cocoyams.

The authors will examine the role of cocoyams in SSA farming systems, cuisines and cultures, and show that there are practical, cultural, and moral grounds to optimise the cultivation and utilisation of cocoyams.

Keywords: Aroids, cocoyams, cuisine and culture, food insecurity, small farmers, soil degradation, sub-Saharan Africa