

Enset, the Tree of the Poor: Nutrition and Identity in Hadiya Zone (South-central Ethiopia)

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The dichotomy abundance/scarcity of food is too simplistic to be accepted. Groups of people deliberately refuse to introduce innovations in their diet and choose to be perceived as backward in order to defend their "tastes". The Hadiya are one of these cases of food resistance, as they primarily rely their livelihoods on one product (the enset).

The enset is the least studied domesticated plant in Africa. The fact is surprising considering that it feeds about 10 million people, and that the populations of the south-central Ethiopia have for centuries based their livelihood on the *amylaceous* products of the *ensete ventricosum*. They never starved, neither during the tragic drought and food shortage of the 70's and 80's of the last century. A large part of the Ethiopians relies on this plant for getting food, fibers, fodder for the animals, building materials and medicines. It is remarkable that in the view of the agronomists, which are involved in promoting the introduction of the enset in the agricultural systems based on cereals, some groups prefer to address the famines. They refuse the food security rather than adopting an hated plant and changing their food taste. Still in the present the enset serves as a symbolic divide between the north and the south. Its character of "tree of the poor" or "tree against the hunger", which was already pointed out in the 17th century by Father Jerome Lobo, can still be guessed. Outside the area of origin and current cultivation, the enset has always been considered a not modern, only suitable for marginal people product.

The paper will explore the reasons underneath the different attitudes shown by the north and the south toward the plant, and the lifestyles it promotes. Particularly, it will focus on the preference given to other crops by the northern people and their refusal of the enset as staple food. This research looks at the plants as related to specific symbolic structures. The study therefore implies that it is possible to map the perceived differences between the north and the south in pragmatic terms, as a set of both agricultural practices and social projects. Growing different plants, according to the local peculiar practices, means to cultivate different forms of humanity: the enset should be regarded as a "cultural food" and as a system of communication through which decoding the social behavior.