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A Brief History of Spices in Ethiopia

Taken from chapter 2 of a book: ***Spice Plants in Ethiopia.***

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There are no detailed records available on the history of spices in Ethiopia. However, throughout the history of Ethiopia, during various periods there had been several allusions made to certain spices in scattered accounts. Most of these sketchy accounts pertain to the search and trade of spices like frankincense, myrrh, etc. In ancient times, frankincense and myrrh in particular were in high demand in Pharaohnic Egypt to honor the gods and embalm the dead. Myrrh was also a popular ingredient of Hebrew anointing oil (Ex. 30:22-24). Ancient Egyptian pharaohs from time to time organized great fleets, which went to the "Land of Punt" in search of these precious spices.[1]

A monument of Sahure during the fifth dynasty, 28th century B.C., records a large quantity of myrrh from Punt.[2]

Another ancient reference made to spices in Ethiopia is at the time of the famous expedition of about 1500 B.C., when the Egyptian pharaoh, Queen Hatshepsut sent a fleet of five sailing ships to the Land of Punt, which was also referred to as the Land of the Gods.[3] The Land of Punt probably refers to ancient Ethiopia, or the latter was part of the former. There are various speculations on the approximate geographical location of the Land of Punt. It may refer to present-day Eritrea, or the region which included present-day Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland, or the whole area south of Egypt along the Red Sea coastline.[4,5] At any rate, the expedition took back, among other items, myrrh trees, incense and cinnamon. These products were listed as "marvels of the country of Punt."An ancient record of the collection of items that the expedition took back to Egypt reads:[1]

"*All goodly fragrant woods of God's land, heaps of myrrh-resin,*
fresh myrrh trees,.....cinnamon wood, khesyt wood, ihmut wood,
sonter incense,..... Never was brought the like of this for any
king who has been since the beginning."

The bark of cinnamon perhaps originated in China and southeast Asia. It may have been transported in primitive outrigger canoes following the archaic "Cinnamon Route" to Madagascar, whence it was taken to the East African coast, to its final destination of the Land of Punt. This contention is supported by the fact that cinnamon trees were not indigenous to the Punt realm. Carvings are seen to this day on the walls of Queen Hatshepsut's temple at Dier el-Bahri, which bear testimony to the ancient expedition to the Land of Punt. The queen wanted to establish a magnificent terraced myrrh garden in homage to the god Amon.[3] An

oracle of Amon is also said to have recorded:[6]

> *"I have given thee Punt. No one knows the way to the Land of Gods anymore; no one has gone up the terraces of incense, none among Egyptians. They have only heard tales of olden times repeated by word of mouth"*

Following these expeditions, during the reign of the pharaoh Amenhotep (1447-1420 BC), two Puntite chiefs were believed to have traveled to Egypt to exchange their goods, which included incenses.[4]

In the 10th century B.C., the Sabean kingdom had become a power in the Red Sea. Incense trade along both shores of the Red
Sea brought prosperity to the Sabeans. About the same time, the power of the Hebrew kingdom of Solomon was also growing in the region. Ships sailed in the Red Sea on trade missions.[6] Around 950 B.C., the Queen of Sheba, Makeda made the much celebrated visit to Jerusalem to develop trade relations with King Solomon. She went to Jerusalem with a great train of camels loaded with spices, gold and other precious stones.[7] The abundance of the spices was such that it was with no equals (I Kings 10:1-13; II Chron.9:1-12). Out of this visit was born Ibn el-Hakim (later King Menelik I), thus starting the long-running Solomonic dynasty of Ethiopia.[8]

In the 3rd century B.C., the Habashat in collaboration with the Sabeans were trading spices and incense with Egypt. The alliance which also included the Hadramut was formed to

resist the threat of the Parthians.[8] In the 1st and 2nd century B.C. the Habashat, also known as the Incense People or Aethiopians, controlled a greater part of what was known as the "Incense Land." This land included a considerable portion of the fertile areas of Arabia, bordered by desert and steppes.[9] Glaser derived the name "*Habash*" from a Mahari word, meaning gatherers. He also derived *Aethopian (Itiopyavan*) from *aytob*, which meant "incense." Mahra, a place in southern Arabia, was referred to as "the Frankincense Country." Because of the repeated attacks of the Parthians from the east, the people from Mahara and Socotra in south Arabia, as well as those from Somaliland (the true frankincense country) were forced to retreat westward to the Tigrean highlands to lay the foundation of what was to become the powerful Axumite Kingdom.[8]

There is a biblical reference made to myrrh from ancient Ethiopia at the time of the birth of Jesus. The kings of Sheba (Saba) offered gifts to baby Jesus (Ps 72:10). The three gifts given to Jesus by the Three Wise Men were myrrh, frankincense and gold. Legend has it that frankincense was given to baby Jesus by an Ethiopian king to symbolize sacrifice.

Around the 1st century A.D., the king of Axum Zosacles, also known as Za Hakel, had control over the entire Red sea coast, including the Berber country (present-day Somalia).[10] There were several ports through which Axum traded, the principal of which was Adulis. The Axumite realm via the "Berber Market Towns" of the ports of Avalites (Zeila), Malao (Berbera) and Mundus (Bandar Hais) exported spices like myrrh, frankincense and cinnamon. Commercial activities of Axum continued for a long time, thereafter.[11] A 6th century Egyptian merchant, Kosmos Indikopleustes, had noted these activities. During this time, traders from Alexandria and Elatic Gulf (Gulf of Aqaba) frequently visited

Adulis. The Axumites reported various items to India, Persia, Arabia and the Eastern Roman

Empire. The export items included frankincense and aromatic substances. On the other hand, pepper was brought back from the Malabar Coast of India.[12]

In the 7th century, the growing tide of Islamic invasions reduced the power of the Axumite Empire. The Ethiopians were forced back and confined to the hinterland, protected by the forbidding natural terrain of escarpments, plateaus and mountains. Commercial links were severed until the 15th century. Of this isolation period, Gibbon writes:[6]

> "*Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten*."

In the 15th century, Europeans, the Portuguese in particular, re-established relations with Ethiopia, and the isolation curtain was thus lifted. Once again, commercial activities were booming. At the local level, in the 16th century, Alvarez describes a market in the northern part of the country where salt, incense, pepper, camphor and other articles were bartered. Many foreigners were present at this market.[13] During this period, the Yemeni port town of Aden was an important commercial center that linked Ethiopia with Arabia, Persia, and the East, including India. In 1517, the Venetian traveler Andrea Corsalis mentioned the importation into Ethiopia of merchandise such as a large number of spices, medicinal drugs, perfumes, and other products through Aden. Cloves, nutmeg, mace, and other commodities were also traded in Aden, which found their way into Ethiopia through Zayla and Berbera. This trading activity of the time was confirmed by the observation of Brother Raphael of Axum, who witnessed that

"many spices" were imported into Ethiopia through the port of Aden.[14] In subsequent centuries, spices like myrrh, onion, red pepper, etc. were commonly sold in local markets.

The cultivated spice plants of Ethiopia reflect the long period of isolation in which the country found itself. Most of the spices that belong to the American and South Asia complexes (Table 1) were probably introduced by the Portuguese in the 16th and 17th centuries. Some plant names of South Asian origin are easily recognized by Europeans, suggesting that they may have been introduced recently, e.g., "*lomi*" for lime and *"jinjibil"* for ginger. *Rhamnus prinoides* (gesho) and *Aframomum korarima* (korarima) appear to be indigenous.

The West Asian complex as a whole is very different in
the nature and patterns of variation from the South Asian and American complexes. Some were introduced at an early date, long enough for them to develop endemic varieties.[6]

A French physician, C.J. Ponchet, who traveled in Ethiopia (1698-1700), mentioned several plants, among which were myrrh, cassia and tamarinds. The Scottish naturalist James Bruce in his journey to find the source of the Nile River in the years 1768 to 1773 studied the natural history of northern Ethiopia. He thus produced an impressive list of about 161 plant species, which included spice plants such as *Boswelia papyrifera*, *Coriandrum sativum*, and *Rhamnus prinoides*.[15] A German traveler, W.G. Schimperi (1837-1878) collected a lot of plant specimens from northern Ethiopia.[15,16]

The spice plant *Thymus schimperi* was perhaps collected during this period. Coming to more recent periods, the Ethiopian spice factory was established in 1971. The main focus of the factory was to extract oleoresin paprika from red peppers for export purposes. Although the factory has the capacity to extract ginger and turmeric, it is engaged more in the production of

oleoresin, which is exported to Europe, North America and Japan. The only other spice extraction company is KAASK, which was just recently established. There are dozens of businesses available in spice trade in Ethiopia, but only ten are considered large exporters. Unprocessed cardamon, ginger, cumin seeds, pepper and chilies are exported by these enterprises.[17]

More recently, *Ariti Herbal Products* was launched with a store in Addis Ababa, and its ancillary *Ariti Herbal Garden* in Sebeta at the outskirts of Addis Ababa. This private company is primarily involved in the preparation of volatile oil-based medicinal and fragrant products. It has also export capabilities. It is perhaps the first of its kind, as far as private endeavor to promote herbal products is concerned. *Ariti Herbal Garden* cultivates a broad range of aromatic plants.[18] Although they are produced for medicinal use and as fragrances, the plants of origin of several of the products are also known to be used traditionally as spices in foods and beverages in Ethiopia. Thyme and clove are two examples which fall in this category (See individual monographs on these spices in this book.)

Official statistics are not always available on the extent of the use and export of spices in Ethiopia. In 1981, about 900 tonnes of spices, predominantly pepper, were exported.[19] The export of "incense gum" (frankincense) for the years 1981, 1982 and 1983 were 318, 831 and 1122 tonnes, respectively. Ethiopia was one of the major exporters of myrrh and frankincense in 1987. In a 1981 estimate, the potential production of olibanum (myrrh) was 23,000 tonnes per year.[20]

Table 1. The origins of some spice plants grown in Ethiopia*

American	South Asian	African	West Asian early introduction	West Asian late introduction
Chili pepper	Lime	*Rhamnus prinoides*[+]	Mustard	Cumin
Sweet pepper	Lemon	*Aframomum korarima*	Garden cress[+]	Rue
	Ginger	Fenugreek[+]		
	Cloves	Coriander[+]		
	Nutmeg	Onion[+]		
	Black pepper	Garlic		
	Basil			

*Adapted from Ref. 6.

[+]Vavilov's Ethiopian center of diversity.

Spices in Ethiopia

It is estimated that there are between 250,000 and 750,000 species of higher plants that occur on this planet.[21] About 50,000 plants have been used at one time or another for medicinal purposes.[22] Considering a conservative number of 250,000 higher plant species in the world, about 12,000 of these (5% of the total) are used as edible plants,[23] although 75,000 are believed to be edible.[24] Of the 12,000 plants which have been used as food, only 2,000 have been domesticated, while about 150 are commercially cultivated. It is also interesting to note that only about 30 plant species provide 90% of the world's food.[24]

In Ethiopia, there are between 6,000 and 7,000 higher plant species, out of about 500 (about 8%) are edible.[23] According to Asfaw and Tadesse, about 400 of these are wild or semi-wild edible plants, while 25% (over 100) are cultivated edible plants. Most Ethiopian spices are cultivated. They comprise about 12% (16 out of 127) of food crops grown in home gardens.[25] In a study of 203 edible wild or semi-wild plant species, Tadesse and Asfaw list 11 as spices, condiments or flavoring plants.[23]

In a study published in *Bioscience*, it was indicated that Ethiopia is one of the ten countries in the world where spices are used the most, in particular in meat-based recipes.[26]

Spices in Ethiopia

One cannot imagine Ethiopian food without spices. It is known for its unique and hot flavor.

Some spices are more important than others, both as culinary or medicinal products. Jansen lists 12 spice plants, and provides a detailed account of the taxonomy, husbandry, distribution, culinary and medicinal uses, and chemistry of these spices. Most of these spice species are grown in home gardens or cultivated as field crops. A few are collected from the wild. Many spices are sold in local markets along with other medicinal plants. In the countryside, they may also be sold in local markets known as *sauce markets* (*yewot gebeya*).[27] Most of the spices used in Ethiopia are also known worldwide.

A 1991 study of 50 spices, aromatic and medicinal plants in eastern Ethiopia indicated that a sizable number of local merchants were involved in the trade of spices, along with other aromatic and medicinal plants. A significant number of the plants (over 25) were spices. Interestingly enough, some of the spices were either imported or smuggled from Asia or East African countries. For example, spice plants such as *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* (*qarafa*), *Elettaria cardamomum* (*heil*), *Piper longum* (*timiz*), and *Piper nigrum* (*qundo berbere*) fall into this category. The study further indicated that capsicum (*berbere*), an *Allium* species (*shinkurt*), and turmeric (*ird*) were the most common spices found in all local markets, with each market in turn specializing in selling certain spices. For example, the markets in Dire Dawa and Harar were found to sell more of fenugreek (*abish*), *Foeniculum vulgare* (*ensilal*) and coriander (*dimbelal*), whereas the Jimma-Aggaro markets specialized in selling cardamom (*korarima*), ginger (*jinjibil*) and garlic (*netch shinkurt*). On the other hand, in Hosahina market, fenugreek (*abish*), caraway (*netch azmud*), garlic (*netch shinkurt*), and coriander (*dimbilal*) were more common. The authors attribute the predominance of one spice over the other to

mainly the food habits, economy and ecology of the respective areas that the markets cater to.[28]

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