

# Going bananas in East Africa (literature and beyond)

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## ABSTRACT

During the last centuries, domestication and cultivation of several varieties of banana in East Africa have influenced economic strategies almost everywhere. Different innovations in subsistence strategies took place in different parts of Africa. My article aims to examine the dynamics of these process in East African countries, and in particular in Tanzania, where banana has become the first source of subsistence for many people. The focus is on three ethnic groups based in Tanzania, namely the Wachagga, Wahaya and Wanyakyusa. Among these groups bananas and plantains have assumed a symbolical function in many aspects of their economic, social and spiritual life.

Keywords: *Plantain, banana, banana eaters, East African Highland banana, mgomba, ndizi.*

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## 1. A brief note on origins and spread of bananas in East Africa

Banana is the common name for herbaceous plants of the genus *Musa* (Musaceae) and for the fruits they produce. Although bananas contribute greatly to the diet in large regions of Africa, they originated in Asia. No species of *Musa* is in fact native to the continent and only the genus *Ensete* is naturally present in Africa and Madagascar (De Langhe et al. 2009: 166; Hapsari 2017: 160; Perrier et al. 2019: 19; Neumann and Hildebrand 2009: 359). Originally, there were two wild species of banana plants, (Ngeze 1994: 1-2; Mbwana et al. 1998: 9; Neumann and Hildebrand 2009: 353; Perrier et al. 2019: 26), known as *Musa acuminata* and *Musa balbisiana*. *Musa acuminata* of the early period, originated in Malaysia, had three types of bananas. The first type had genome A that could reproduce with seeds and had small fruits inedible by human beings. The second type had genome AA that had seedless fruits, and the third type had genome AAA, and produced bigger fruits. The last two types had edible fruits, and were the first bananas to be planted by man. Fruits of *Musa balbisiana* (genome BB) were not edible (Ngeze 1994: 1; Mbwana et al. 1998: 9). With time, these two species hybridized to generate the cultivars available today. Bananas with the AA or AAA genomes are sweet and cultivated as dessert banana while hybrids with AAB (plantain) and ABB genomes are starchier and used as cooking bananas. Banana cultivation is core in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, north-western Tanzania extending to the Indian Ocean coastline, in Kenya or Tanzania around the volcanoes such as Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro. The crops also exist on the offshore islands such as Pemba and Zanzibar, where Baker and Simmons (1952, cited in Perrier et al. 2019: 21) identified two types of wild bananas, namely *Mjenga* (AA, Rossel 1998: 90) and *Paka* (AA, Rossel 1998: 223) whose seedy fruits named in Swahili *Mgomba*<sup>1</sup> *tumbili* (*Ensete ventricosum* (Welw.) Cheesman, Fabaceae) (Quattrocchi 2012: 1570; Neumann and Hildebrand 2009: 355) and *Mgombakofi* (*Typhonodorum lindleyanum* Schott, Aracaceae)

<sup>1</sup> The Swahili term *mgomba* refers to the banana plant (TUKI 2001: 200).

(Quattrocchi 2012: 3831). They were used as famine food in the past and are still eaten by children (Perrier et al. 2019: 21).<sup>2</sup>

As edible derivatives of wild species *Musa acuminata* (genome A), the AAA triploids of the *Mutika* subgroup called EAHB (East African Highlands Bananas) are very widely grown in East Africa, in particular in the Great Lake region, where they are the main crop in many areas, but it is rare in the highlands of the Kenya and Tanzania zone where AA diploid varieties are grown and are of considerable importance for some ethnic groups. De Langhe et al. (1995) suggest three waves of banana introduction in Africa: African plantains AAB in west and central rainforest regions, highland adapted AAA banana around the Great Lakes, and a diverse range of genomes around the south-east coastal regions. According to Van der Veen (2011) and Ngeze (1994), it seems that bananas spread from south-east Asia into Africa passing through the Indian Ocean, brought to the Eastern African coast by Arab travellers and traders (Chami 1994: 45). Another hypothesis is based on the Baganda myth of Kintu. In Uganda, Baganda people have a traditional belief that the first banana plant was introduced there by their tribal ancestor Kintu who is believed to have entered Uganda from the north, near Mount Elgon about the year 1000 A. D. with a banana plant. According to this belief, bananas were transported from India via Southern Arabia, and then into Africa through Southern Ethiopia to Northern Uganda (Ngeze 1994: 4). After bananas were introduced in East Africa, they spread into regions and districts of Tanzania.

Thanks to his field research carried out in many districts of Tanzania, Ngeze (1994: 101-108) has collected a number of vernacular Swahili names of bananas, and diversifies cooking bananas cultivars from beer making bananas cultivars.

Cooking bananas' vernacular names in Tanzanian districts are: *ndizi*<sup>3</sup> *ng'ombe*, *mwanambwe*, *ndizi mshale*, *ndizi mzuzu*, *kimalindi*, *mkojozi* or *ndizi mkojozi*, *ndizi Uganda*, *mkono wa tembo*, *mshale*, *kitarasa*, *kisukari*, *kisamungu*, *kiguruwe*, *kitaji/kijivujivu*, *kikahawia*, *mchokozi*, *makumbukwa* or *mjakazi*, *mjenja maua*, *mkonga wa tembo*, *bokoboko*, *kisukari*, *usiniguse*, *ndizi mwekundu*, *matako ya mjakazi*, *malaya*.

Making beer banana varieties are: *kisukari*, *kiguruwe*, *ndizi ng'ombe*, *kijivu*, *kibungara*, *ndizi kikojozi*, *mchokozi*, *kipakapaka*, *ndizi fupi nene*<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> According to Heine and Legère (1995: 135), the Swahili term *mgomba* refers to *Musa* species and varieties including banana and plantains. In addition to the term *mjenja*, the scholars collected 17 *mgomba* specifics: *kichaazi*, *kidimbili*, *kiguruwe*, *kijakazi*, *kikonde*, *kipukusa*, *kisukari*, *koroboi*, *mlalemaua*, *mkono mmoja*, *mkono wa thambo*, *mtwike*, *Mzungu mwekundu*, *Mzungu mweupe*, *ndizi za mzungu*, *sunuha*, *tungu*. In 1937, Greenway (1937:31-32, cited in Heine and Legère 1995: 135) listed 13 names of varieties: *bungala*, *kichaazi*, *kiguruwe*, *kipukusa*, *kisukari*, *kisukari bungala*, *kizungu chekundu*, *makojozi*, *mboko*, *milali maua*, *mngazija*, *mjenja maua*, *mkono wa tembo*, and *mzuzu*. Philippson and Bauchet (1994-95: 107) claim that *mgomba* means 'banana tree', *mgomba -mwitu*, literally 'bush banana tree' refers to *Ensete*. They highlight that the word *mgomba* occurs under this or similar form in several languages of Central Tanzania, where bananas are not generally an important crop, like Gogo and Sukuma.

<sup>3</sup> The Swahili term *ndizi* refers to banana fruits (TUKI 2001:242).

<sup>4</sup> The examples of the names of the plants given above show that they are rarely formed by a monomial expression. Following the Swahili noun class system, monomial expression consists of a noun stem plus a noun class prefix, e. g. the generic term for banana plant *m-gomba* (cl. 3/4; m-/mi-). More frequently the primary lexeme is followed by a nominal adjective modifier (attributive expression), e.g. *ndizi mwekundu* ('red banana fruit'). Concerning folk taxonomy see: HEINE, Bernd, and Karsten LEGERE (1995) *Swahili Plants. An Ethnobotanical Survey*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe, chapter 2.

In Arusha district bananas originated in Bukoba, Uganda and Kilimanjaro where the type of banana known as *ndizi Uganda*<sup>5</sup> grows. The main banana type found in Bagamoyo district, on the coast is called *Malindi*, a variety of beer banana ('Malindi' AAA 'Giant Cavendish', Rossel 1998: 102). In Kigoma region, bananas types are called *Mzuzu* (French plantain, Rossel 1998: 131). Banana plants in Kibondo district originated in Burundi. In 1938 Mr Johnson, the then District Commissioner, ordered every peasant to plant 50 banana suckers. In Mbeya region, bananas are called *ndizi Uganda* or *ndizi Makwamele* in memory of Jonathan Makwamele, a teacher who introduced bananas in the district in the 1920s. In Ruvuma region – Mbinga district, it is believed that people who visited Mozambique and Malawi returned with banana suckers for planting in Mbinga. The type of banana called *Ndizi mwekundu* (Red banana fruit) or *Mzungu* (European) originated in Malawi. In Tanga region, it seems that the banana known as *Malindi*, originated in Kenya, and introduced by Arab slave traders. Another type of banana is called *Mngazija* and is of Arab origin (Ngeze 1994: 7.12).

## 2. Banana plants as means of social and economic challenges in East African Highlands

According to Karamura et al. (2012: 6), the East African Highland bananas (*Musa AAA*) locally known as the *Matooke* are largely found in subsistence systems/small holdings of the East African region, thriving on altitudes between 900-2,000 meters above sea level; hence they are now more often called the East African Highland bananas (EAHB). The crop occupies a large part of the East African Plateau which covers Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, North-Western Tanzania and Western Kenya, with temperature ranges of 10-30°C. Banana production is an important livelihood for farming households, as food and as a source of income. According to Rietveld and Farnworth (2018), among some East African Highland ethnic groups, men have the control on banana plantations. Women's options to choose banana as livelihood are limited and when they cultivate the crops independently, with almost no doubt they are women whose husbands have another job or widows who inherited the land planted with banana after the death of their husbands. In some regions land may be inherited by the children or other relatives of the late husband. Although it is rare for women to own banana plantations, they often work in the fields. The amount of the time they need to allocate to the banana crop is much dependent on the mode of production and the type of banana. Plantations with cooking-banana cultivars are usually more intensively managed than plantations with mostly beer-banana cultivars. In Uganda, the raw banana fruit is marketed or, in the case of beer-banana cultivars, it is processed into beer and gin. Although in household where an adult man is present, every income derived from the sales is controlled by men, however women have access to banana for home consumption requirements and for children's school fees. Because of the problems caused by several factors such as a poor marketing system, big decline in soil fertility and pest banana diseases (Ngeze 1994: 13-15, 90; Rietveld 2013: 191-194), in some highlands regions' districts, like Kayonza district in Rwanda, many women expressed a move away from banana in favor of maize while men still consider banana production an essential element of their livelihood. Nsabimana and Gaidashova (2012: 25) stress that in Rwanda, local cultivars are genetically diverse with all *Musa* group (AA, AB, AAA, AAB, and ABB)

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<sup>5</sup> As Mgenzi et al. (2012: 3) suggest, *Ndizi Uganda* (Banana fruit from Uganda) belongs to the Lujugira-Mutika subgroup. In Uganda they are called *ebitooke ebiganda*, meaning 'native to Uganda'.

although groups of AA, some AAA, AAB and ABB are considered to be of recent introduction in the country. The two scholars confirm that bananas are relatively expensive and dominate the peri-urban areas, while brewing bananas gain big rural and urban-market for banana beer. The use of banana in Rwanda is not limited to brewing and direct consumption. Numerous processed non-food items ranging from toys for children to decoration of houses are made from various parts of banana plants.

### 3. *Watetea ndizi mgomba si wao*<sup>6</sup>: Banana Eaters in Tanzania

In Tanzania, three ethnic groups are known as the banana-eaters: the Chagga in the northern part of the country, the Haya in the northwestern part, and the Nyakyusa in the southern part. Among these groups, only the Nyakyusa live on plantains (AAB); the other two groups intensively cultivate a number of other varieties of cooking bananas (AAA), known collectively as East African Highland bananas (Maruo, 2002). These three ethnic groups are closely linked to the environment in which they live.

#### 3.1 *The Chagga of Mount Kibo*

Kilimanjaro area is known as dense banana forests with a scattered upper tree layer, the so-called Chagga home gardens, or banana grove”, in Chagga language “mndà” (Hemp 2006a). According to Koponen (1988: 233), in order to manage their home gardens the Chagga constructed long canals through which water was made to flow from mountains streams to their places, and branches and sub-branches were dug to gardens and fields from each main furrow. According to Ntiro (1953)<sup>7</sup>, Wachagga or Chagga people settled in Kilimanjaro area in remote times, and precisely at the foot of Mount Kibo, one of the three volcanic cones of Kilimanjaro.

[...] Kibo ni mlima ulio mrefu kuliko milima mingine yote ya Afrika (...) Maana ya neno hili Kibo ni madoadoa (...) kwa umbali kama uonekanavyo na sababu ya mtelemko wa barafu juu ya jabali lake (...) Mlima wa Kibo una kilele kingine cha pili kitiwacho Mawenzi (...). Mlima wa Kibo uko kati ya Tanganyika na Kenya (...) Kwa kila Mchagga, Kibo ni kitu kilicho ndani yake kabisa. (...) Usemi mmoja wa Kichagga wasema ‘Nyumbani kwa mtu ndipo mahali pakubwa kuliko mahali pengine po pote, hata kama ni juu ya jiwe’ [...]” (Ntiro 1953: 1-3).

[...] Kibo is the highest mount in Africa (...) The name Kibo means ‘stained’ (...) for a flow of ice on the rock. (...) Mount Kibo has another mountain summit called Mawenzi (...). Mount Kibo lies between Tanganyika and Kenya (...) For each Chagga, Kibo has a deep and intimate meaning (...) A saying from Wachagga states ‘The house for a man is the largest place even if it is placed on a single stone’ [...]” (Ntiro 1953: 1-3)<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> This is a Swahili proverb meaning “They argue over the bananas fruit (*ndizi*) but the banana plant (*mgomba*) belongs to someone” (Khasandi –Telewa (2016: 149).

<sup>7</sup> On Chagga people there are many important studies such as: DUNDAS, Hon Charles (1924) *Kilimanjaro and Its people: A History of the Wachagga, Their Laws, Customs, and Legend, together with some account of the highest Mountain in Africa*. London: H. F.&G. Witherby; BENDER, Matthew V. (2013) “Being ‘Chagga’: Natural Resources, Political Activism, and Identity on Kilimanjaro”, *The Journal of African History* 54, 2: 199-220; MAANGA, Godson S. (2015) “Rewriting Chagga History: Focus on Ethno-Anthropological Distortion and Misconceptions”, *Global Journal of Human Social Sciences: History, Archaeology & Anthropology* 15, 2: 1-16, however I chose to quote some excerpts from Ntiro’s text because till 1950s, the former Tanganyika was a country with few historical records and *Desturi za Wachagga* (‘Customs and Traditions of the Chagga People’, 1953) by S. J. Ntiro was the first volume published in *Custom and Tradition in East Africa series*.

<sup>8</sup> English version mine.

Ntiro continues describing Wachagga as an interethnic tribe (Ntiro 1953: 5) and inform us about some of their main cultural aspects such as banana cultivation and related rituals:

[...] Katika nchi nzima ya Kilimanjaro ndizi ni chakula kikubwa kuliko vyakula vingine vyote. Tangu zamani za kale Wachagga walikuwa wakiishi juu ya ndizi (...). Tangu zamani za kale mtu aliyepata 'kihamba' alianza kupanda migomba mara moja. (...) Kulikuwako ndizi za namna nyingi (...) mzuzu zilipandwa kwa kuchoma tu, zingine zilikuwa mbivu na zingine zilipandwa kwa kupika pombe tu. (...) Pombe ya ndizi ilikuwa na manufaa mengi kwa watu kwa kuwa ilitumiwa kwa njia nyingi (...) Kama Mchagga akimwita rafiki yake nyumbani kwake bila shaka alimpa pombe. Mpaka leo hivi kama mtu akimtumia rafiki yake habari afike kwake yule rafiki yake atajua kama ni lazima anywe pombe. (...) Hakuna Mchagga aliyeoa bila kupika pombe nyingi. Pombe zilikuwa za lazima; bwana harusi alipika sufuria tano au sita lakini ile ya mwisho ilikuwa nyingi kuliko zote. Hii pombe ya mwisho bwana harusi alisaidiwa na ndugu zake pamoja na watu wa ukoo wake. Pombe hii waliitiwa watu wote wa ukoo wa yule mtoto wakike. Kama pombe ilikuwa nzuri watu wakanywa ya kutosha, walimbariki pale pale wakimwomba baraka ya Mungu ampe maisha marefu ya amani yeye na mkewe [...] (Ntiro 1953: 19-21).

[...] In the whole Kilimanjaro area, banana fruits are the better food. Since ancient time Wachagga have based their subsistence on bananas (...). Since ancient times, a man who had a 'kihamba' (homegarden) he immediately began to cultivate banana trees. (...) There were various types of bananas (...) *mzuzu* were grown for roasting, others to be eaten raw, and others for making *pombe*<sup>9</sup>. (...) Banana's *pombe* was useful in many events and people used it in many ways (...) If Mchagga invited a friend home to get some information, certainly he would offer him a *pombe* drink. Also today, if a man invites a friend home to get some information, his friend knows that he will be obliged to drink pombe. (...) There is no Mchagga who got married without first preparing a large quantity of pombe. Pombe was indispensable; groom prepared five or six pots, however the last contained more pombe than others. The groom was helped by his friend and relatives to finish the final pombe. This *pombe* made them belonging to the same family as the bride. If pombe was good, they drank enough, groom was blessed, and they prayed to God to give him and his wife a long and peaceful life [...] (Ntiro 1953: 19-21)<sup>10</sup>.

Nowadays, in their home gardens the Chagga use several vegetation layers. Under a tree layer, which provides shadow, fodder, medicines, firewood and formerly also construction wood, bananas are grown and under the bananas coffee trees. According to Hemp (2006 a; 2006 b), this farming system evolved over several centuries and did not change much over the last decades compared with the land uses in the lower zones. The agroforestry system of the Chagga home gardens is a unique feature of Kilimanjaro, stretching on the climatically most favourable zone of the southern and south-eastern slopes over an area of 1000 km<sup>2</sup> (Hemp 2006 a).

### 3.2 *The Haya of Great Lakes region*

The Haya are one of the main ethnic group in Tanzania. They settle in the Lake Victoria basin (Maruo 2002: 147; Ishengoma 2005: 141). They are known as banana growers in the country, and EAHB has been found in and around the Great Lakes region. Like the Chagga, also the Haya are characterized by intensive land use and management of

<sup>9</sup> The swahili term *pombe* refers to local brew, beer (TUKI 2001: 268).

<sup>10</sup> English version mine.

banana-based home garden. As Maruo (2002: 151) stresses that a typical Haya landscape is made of two components: *kibanja*, that is the banana-based home garden, and *lweya* or bush land. According to Kamanzi (2012), in the *kibanja* there are the home for living that is called *mushonge*, a name originating from Kihaya word “mushongole” meaning ‘somebody who is wealthy. The *Mushonge* is surrounded by a banana plantation. The home for the dead is called *kituulo*, the burial ground. The local varieties of banana are called *kitooke* (the cooking banana), *mbire* (brewing banana), *nkonjwa* (roasting banana). Cooking banana is the dominant component of *kibanja*. *Obukongo* are a kind of wild yam eaten only when there is a critical shortage of edible bananas. The Haya consider shameful for a respectable household to eat *obukongo* or *embiile/enkundi* which are inedible. According to Ishengoma (2005: 143), bananas play a very important social, economic and cultural role among the Haya: they are a staple food stuff and the ingredient for local beer also called by the generic name of *pombe*. According to Carlson (1990), the traditional fermented drink of the Haya is a banana-sorghum beverage (*amarwa*), produced with bananas of a particular type (*embiile/enkundi*) that differ the staple cooking banana (*ebitoke*). The Haya recognize four levels of physical effects caused by banana beer: the first level (*okwehoteleza*) is marked by the absence of altered perception; the second level (*okushemera*) refers to feeling happy as a result of being full with banana beer; the third level (*okushaawa amarwa*) means losing control of oneself; and the fourth level (*okutamiila*) refers to being quite drunk. As Baer et al. (2003: 130) claim, drinking properly in Haya culture means never going beyond the second of these levels. Traditionally, men are responsible for producing banana beer; women and children may assist in various phases of production. Women are not allowed to crush the bananas. Although banana beer is a secular refreshment, it has symbolic value since Haya men must be sexually abstinent while brewing the beer; banana beer is also a necessary component of all celebrations and life-cycle rituals, including negotiations between clans for marriages, and the offering for the ancestors (Carlson 1992: 298, 303-304).

Following the independence of the former Tanganyika (1961), and after in 1980s, the Haya began to experience a change of their economic system when the demand for cooking banana arose in urban dwellers. According to Maruo (2002: 160-161) most of the bananas have been carried to Mwanza, the second largest city of the country, and improvement of transportation have promoted the increase of such local trade from 1990s onwards. In addition to the trade of cooking banana to urban areas, also demand for brewing banana has increased, and it seems to be a new cash source for women who buy 20 or 30 bunches of those bananas from villagers, then brew and sell the *pombe* in the neighboring towns.

### 3.3 *The Nyakyusa*

The Nyakyusa are an ethnic group belonging to the Tanganyika Bantu, settled in Mbeya region. They live mainly by farming (Kurita 1993: 192-193). The basic unit of land holding is the *kaaja* that can be considered a plantain-based home garden. When a *kaaja* is transferred from a father to sons, the land is divided evenly among the sons. Land held by the village is under the control of cell groups called *nyumba kumi* (‘ten houses’ in Swahili), a cooperative unit that consists of about 30 households.

According to Maruo (2007: 24-25), this system was promoted in Tanzania after the independence of Tanganyika in 1961, under the villagization policy, and was introduced to Nyakyusa society together with a new administrative system to replace the conventional chieftainship system. Each sub-village (*kitongoji*, the smallest administrative unit in

Tanzania) constitutes several *nyumba kumi* groups. As plantain (vernacular name *iffu*) and bananas (vernacular name *ibifu*) are the dominant crops, Nyakyusa have developed specific agronomic skills such as removing excess leaves to refresh the garden as well as prevent pest attack; debudding all varieties after the emergence of the inflorescence; applying organic matter to the crop. Local plantain variety *mbundya* and the dessert banana *mwamnyila* have two colour forms in the stem or fruit. The general term for plantain in Nyakyusa is *itooki*. It is said that the banana variety *gulutu* has been introduced by a man from Zambia, and *halale* by European missionaries (Maruo 2007: 28-35).

Wilson (1954: 229) highlights that in Nyakyusa culture plantain (*itoki*) symbolizes male energy and sweet banana (*iselya, injali or indefu*) the female. According to Maruo (2007: 36), this representation of gender value is probably due to the paternalistic society of the Nyakyusa: every clan and almost every household has a sacred plantain plant or grove for ceremonies in which the clan head prays to the ancestors. The plant or grove is never cut down and its fruits are not eaten by women, since they believe the spirits of their ancestral fathers reside within. Among Nyakyusa people, rituals are frequent and elaborate. As Wilson (1954: 231-232) points up, plantains and bananas play a symbolic role in many of the rituals connected to death and life. Death is very fearful and the ritual of separation from the dead is directed toward cleansing the close relatives from the contamination of the death. If the deceased is a married man, his heir is formally recognized, being put into a hut with the widows, then a plantain flower, representing the corpse, is buried. After the rite of purification, the heir and widows feed on ground plantain pulp with pumpkin seeds. The floor of the deceased's hut is then covered with dry banana leaves on which the mourners sleep and sit. After a further purification rite, relatives of the deceased and neighbours go together to a stream to bathe, and throw away a stem of plantains, a symbol of the corpse, into the water. But first, the flowering head of banana is buried in the courtyard near the door of the mourning hut and the grave of the deceased. If he was not a married man, the ritual begins with this. The banana flower is identified with the corpse: it must face in the direction from which the ancestors came, as the corpse does. If the deceased is a male, the flowering head is from a plantain (*itoke*); if a female from a sweet banana (*iselya, injali or indefu*). Wilson claims (1954: 233) that the general form of the ritual is the same at death, at marriage, and at birth. When a girl is married, after she has gone to her husband, she returns with plantains mixed with the sex fluids to bury in her father's grove. The birth ritual is elaborated, and it is prolonged and complex in case of abnormal birth, that is twin birth (Keraro et al. 2013: 14) or breach delivery. Abnormal birth is felt to be dangerous as well as death, and a large circle of relatives is held to be in danger. Affines, and mother's relatives gather for the purification, and a mess of plantains is taken by the mother of twins to her father's grove (Wilson 1954: 234).

Wilson (1957) suggests that the symbolism is interpreted in terms of the habit of growth. A trunk of plantain or sweet banana flowers and fruits only once, then dies and is pruned away, being replaced by a sucker from the sweet root, hence the association between the flower and the corpse.

As Maruo (2007: 36) highlights, such symbolization probably works as a social tool to protect plantain that plays a key role in consolidating the development of the Nyakyusa rural community.

#### 4. Conclusions

Banana is one of the most important and oldest food crops of humankind, and the plantain variety constitutes the main staple food for millions of people in tropical Africa. Evidence for the time of origin of cultivated plants are obtained from linguistics, oral traditions, accounts of ancient travellers and archaeology. By studying phytoliths, archeologists have partially solved the problem of dating the presence of certain varieties of banana in a given country. Despite the many studies and researches that have been published, there are still perplexities about the introduction and spread of the banana in East Africa. Most of the cultivars of edible bananas derive from hybridization. East Africa is one of main centres of *Musa* diversity as a result of a long history of cultivation in that region. There are about sixty cultivars of EAHB (genome AAA) unique to East Africa. What is certain is that banana cultivars have influenced economic, cultural and social aspects of many East African ethnic groups whose subsistence is banana-based. The banana fruit can be eaten raw or cooked, can be fermented for the production of local alcohol. Speaking of nature and relative symbols of the vegetable world with reference to bananas and plantains means giving relevance to a particular aspect of African culture and in particular of East African agrarian economy and mode of production. It is in this dynamic system of economics that rituals became important social institutions for creating and confirming social relationships.

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## SOMMARIO

Negli ultimi secoli, la coltivazione di molte varietà di banane in Africa orientale ha contribuito allo sviluppo di strategie economiche e di sussistenza quasi ovunque. Questo articolo ha come obiettivo esaminare le dinamiche che sono alla base dei processi economici e sociali in alcuni paesi dell'Africa orientale. Un'attenzione particolare è data a tre gruppi etnici stanziati in Tanzania: i Wachagga, i Wahaya e i Wanyakyusa. Rappresentando la principale fonte di sussistenza per queste popolazioni, le banane hanno assunto una funzione simbolica in molti aspetti della loro vita economica, sociale e spirituale.