

The History of Rice in West Africa

Rice has been cultivated in West Africa for at least 3000 years. Strabo noted that rice was cultivated in the Fezzan (modern-day Libya) by the Garamantes. Although this is well outside the zone of cultivation today, African rice was probably common in the Sahara in wetter periods (Chevalier, 1932:86). African rice (*Oryza glaberrima*) is a distinct species from Asian rice (*Oryza sativa*) and is not interfertile with it. The first reference to rice in West Africa is in the writings of Leo Africanus (Africanus, 1632), who travelled through the region in the 1560s and noted the practice of sowing rice 'on the waters' in the area of modern-day Sokoto in northwestern Nigeria, a technique still used today.

In view of its importance, indigenous African rice is one of the least-known major cereals (Portres, 1955, 1976). African rice is cultivated both as a field crop and a paddy crop. In addition, there are remarkable deepwater varieties specific to the unusual flood conditions that occur in the inland Niger Delta. These can be harvested, like the weedy wild rice, *O. Barthii*, from canoes when the flood has risen, a technique also used by American Indians to harvest *Zizania aquatica*. Its existence as an indigenous species separate from Asian rice was only recognised in 1914 (Chevalier, 1932:87). *O. glaberrima* is generally considered to have evolved from *O. Barthii* which it still resembles closely.

The exact zone of domestication of *Oryza sativa* remains uncertain, although it is certainly South East Asia. Recent studies have suggested that it may have been domesticated twice, once in India and once in China, corresponding to the *indica* and *japonica* races. This event may be of considerable antiquity as carbonised seeds of allegedly domestic rice may go back as much as 8000 years.

Rice would have spread across Central Asia to the Near East, and classical sources suggest that it was being cultivated in Mesopotamia and Persia by the 2nd. century BC. Unlike its African relative, *O. glaberrima*, Asian rice has a relatively short history in Africa. There is no certain evidence for its presence in Ancient Egypt (FGO:492), despite the claims of Daressy (1922). Tackholm (1949-61, 1:411) believed that it was introduced between the 7th. and 16th. centuries. He pointed out that the Coptic term was derived from Arabic, supporting a late transmission from further East. Watson (1983:17) collects together references illustrating the diffusion of Asian rice in Africa. In the twelfth century, al-Zuhri mentions that rice was a staple for the Abyssinians living along the Nile. In the 13th. and 14th. centuries rice is reported on the East African coast. However, the names for rice in Swahili appear to link it with India rather than the Arabs. The Portuguese were responsible for bringing Asiatic rice to the coast of West-Central Africa, since it is usually known by words incorporating *arroz* (Williamson, 1970). However, it may also have spread from North Africa across the Sahara, via the oases.

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