INDIGENOUS VALLEY BOTTOM CULTIVATION AND INNOVATION AMONG THE BENA IN TANZANIA

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Abstract

The typical topography of the Southern Highlands of Tanzania consists of rolling hills and tangled streams with numerous shallow valleys. Swamps are formed in the valley bottoms, where a rich amount of organic matter piles up due to the wet and cool climate. In this area, the Bena practice a form of indigenous dry season cultivation called *fiyungu*. The uniqueness of *fiyungu* cultivation lies in the following two points: first, its drainage technology that enables the utilization of valley-bottom swamps; and second, its cultivation method that promotes the decomposition of organic matter in the soil and the neutralization of soil acidity. Beans, maize and green vegetables are cultivated in *fiyungu* fields.

However, *fiyungu* cultivation has been modified in response to socioeconomic changes since the United Republic of Tanzania took its current form in 1964. Villagization, which led to a rise in population density, resulted in a shortage of *fiyungu* cultivating area. To solve this problem, the Bena strengthened their drainage technology to utilize the wetter parts of swamps. In addition, they began to use chemical fertilizers and modified their cultivation method to enable repeated cultivation. Economic liberalization led to the commercialization of *fiyungu* beans, which were valued in the off-season market, and the Bena thus began to cultivate beans for cash in *fiyungu* fields.

Fiyungu cultivation uses indigenous agricultural technologies, which change valley-bottom swamps into useful cultivating area. The Bena have modified their own agricultural technologies in response to macro socioeconomic changes in Tanzania. It is their deep knowledge and attachment to valley-bottom cultivation that gave these innovations an indigenous character.