

Supporting An Indigenous Permaculture

Yiragacheffe, Ethiopia, November 30, 2007 - All of Root Capital's agricultural clients practice at least some sustainable farming techniques, from reforestation and soil conservation to certified organic farming, often as a way of reversing productivity declines resulting from adoption of modern farming practices. But the members of the [Yirgacheffe Coffee Farmers Cooperative Union](#), in the highlands of southern Ethiopia, don't need anyone to teach them about sustainability. Their coffee—regarded by connoisseurs as one of the best in the world—is grown in a unique indigenous permaculture system that has sustained this land and its people for 5,000 years.

The coffee crop is native to Ethiopia, and as a result its cultivation has been integrated into indigenous production systems for millennia. But it is in the mountainous Gedeo Zone, home to the Yirgacheffe coffee appellation, that coffee farming has become a part of what has been called “the most durably sustained land use system on the plant.”

This agroforestry system revolves around one remarkable crop, known locally as ensete and in English as “false banana,” (Latin *ensete ventricosum* MUSACEAE). Resembling a banana tree but without fruit, the fermented flesh of the enset tree is the staple food of Gedeo people. Growing year round, perfectly adapted to its native habitat, and producing a large volume of biomass, ensete as a food staple can support human populations five times as dense as those depending on cereal crops like wheat or the Ethiopian *teff*. The ensete-eating Gedeo people have thus been spared the brutal famines that are too familiar in northern Ethiopia, earning ensete the description “a tree against hunger.” The plant is also of central cultural importance: newborns, newlywed couples, and the dying are all laid on beds of ensete leaves.

Ensete plays a crucial role in preventing soil erosion, allowing the Gedeo people to farm on steep terrain without terracing. The plant has a short vegetative trunk topped by a wide, funnel-shaped leaf cluster that protects topsoil by capturing most of the rainwater that falls over an ensete field. The water is then stored within the plant's trunk, and slowly redistributed to surrounding plants through a fibrous root system that also helps hold the soil together. When an ensete plant is harvested, its roots die off leaving micro-tunnels that aerate the soil.

Ensete anchors a dense and diverse polyculture. Of greatest interest to the international market, coffee of the highest quality thrives under the shade of enset's leaves. But there is more in a Gedeo farmer's plot than just coffee and ensete: the coffee's flowers provide sustenance to honeybees, which are kept in hives hung from the branches of native leguminous trees, which provide firewood to cook the ensete and whose leaf litter provides a crucial organic fertilizer. Climbing fruits and beans hang from tree branches, cabbage grows under coffee trees, and sheep and goats eat ensete as fodder while depositing nutrient-rich manure.



While this system allows Gedeo farmers to be largely food self-sufficient, price premiums for organic and Fair Trade certified coffee are providing cash income to meet educational and health needs. Root Capital lends to the Yirgacheffe Union on the basis of purchase contracts from Trabocca, a Dutch organic coffee trader that has worked closely with Ethiopian cooperative unions to help small farmers become certified. While these farmers have always produced organically and would continue to do so in any case, the certification represents a recognition by the market of the value of an ancient, indigenous understanding of sustainable land use.