

Marugu: better than bread

Edward Mulaama

The Tiriki people, a subgroup of the Luhyia people of Western Kenya, live in an area bordered by Lake Victoria, Mount Elgon and the Nandi Escarpment. Tiriki sub-district has many hills and valleys and is divided into two relatively equal parts – the Hamisi and the Kaimosi divisions separated by the River Galgory. Most of the 430,000 people who live in the area practise mixed agriculture.

Harsh environment

Kaimosi Division has relatively fertile soils and farmers grow a variety of crops including millet, sorghum, bananas, maize, beans, and two cash crops: tea and coffee. There are plenty of grazing areas for cattle and the two local livestock markets are the most important in the Western province. Hamisi Division has rocky soils, is more hilly and soil erosion is a particularly serious problem. It is difficult to imagine how crops manage to take root in such a rocky area.

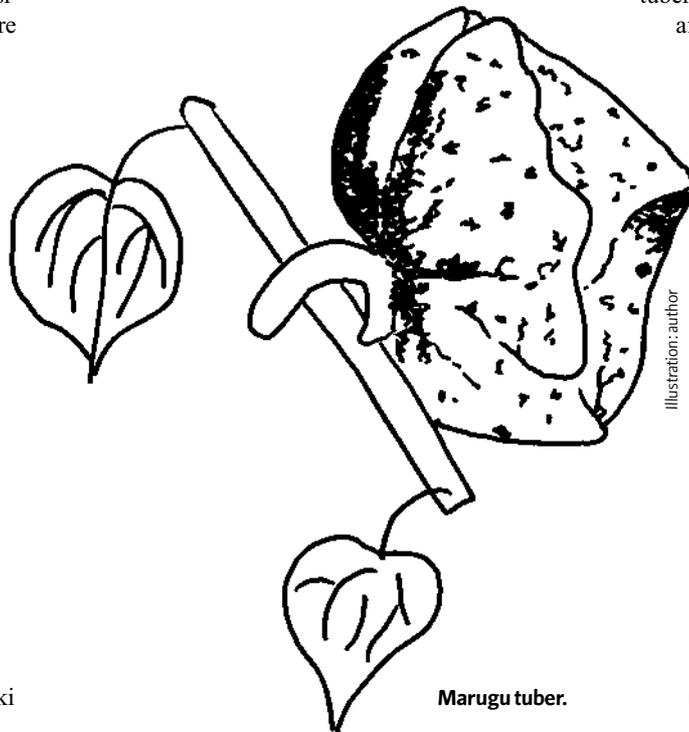
There are no industries in Hamisi and unemployment rates, especially amongst young people, continue to soar. Most men have left Tiriki and moved to the urban areas in search of jobs. They have left behind women-headed households who have to scrape a living from tiny farms. Malaria and typhoid claim thousands of lives in Tiriki every year.

A local resource

Dioscorea bulbifera, locally known among the Tiriki as *marugu*, a yam variety native to Western Kenya, is being revived to supplement the local diet. At an early age local children are taught to distinguish the edible *marugu* from the wild species which closely resembles *D. bulbifera* but which is highly toxic. The *marugu* may be wild in other parts of Africa but in this part of Kenya it has been domesticated. It is an angular heart-shaped, pinkish-white 'potato' that is usually cooked in a clay pot or roasted under glowing ashes. *Marugu* is allowed to cook or bake for at least one full hour and is considered ready when a thin thorn, stuck into the "potato", comes away clean. When cooked, the cover peels off easily leaving behind a whitish pink brownish fluffy potato-like yam. *Marugu* are usually served by themselves with cold water for lunch or with hot tea or coffee for breakfast. A meal of *marugu* is filling and a favourite dish for many after a heavy day's farm work.

Marugu is little known outside the Tiriki region but has a potential for wide use not only among the Tiriki but throughout the entire western part of Kenya. The tubers remain underground and sprout at the onsets of the first rains. This is a special and unique characteristic.

The Tiriki preserve their *marugu* for months and cook them when the need arises. *Marugu* are climbers and, like passion fruits, they need to be supported to grow. They are usually planted along fences or by the sides of streams, near banana or coffee stems or close to trees. *Marugu* are cultivated along with other food crops and so they do not require separate pieces of land. The farmer tends them at the same time as he looks after his main crops. Because of their ability to conserve water they can be planted in arid places. *Marugu* are perennials so that when the stem dies, the tuber remains in the soil and sprouts afresh when the rains return. This gives the farmer an economic advantage because he or she is able to save on labour and seed.



Marugu tuber.

Marugu are grown mainly by farmers who hold some cultural status in the community. These farmers get a sense of pride when they see people coming to their homes to ask for this special yam and are determined to protect its cultivation not only for economic reasons but because it also allows them to exert a special influence in the community.

Marugu's changing fortunes

The *marugu* offers new opportunities for trade and nutrition and provides another economic outlet for Tiriki people. Some *marugu* are packed in Western Kenya and dispatched to the urban areas where they are sold as an indigenous alternative to white bread for high prices. The Tiriki have actively begun to promote this crop and, with rising population and recurring drought and famine, the use of *Dioscorea bulbifera* as a food supplement is expected to rise in the near future.

The production of *marugu* declined originally because of foreign influence. As more young Kenyans became educated in the 1960s and 1970s, they learnt to eat wheat bread from the time they started boarding school and came to regard it as sophisticated and 'modern.' In the 1970s, Kenya's population was about 10 million but over the last 30 years it has increased considerably. Since the 1990s, however, the Kenyan economy has been in depression. The size of a loaf of bread has been

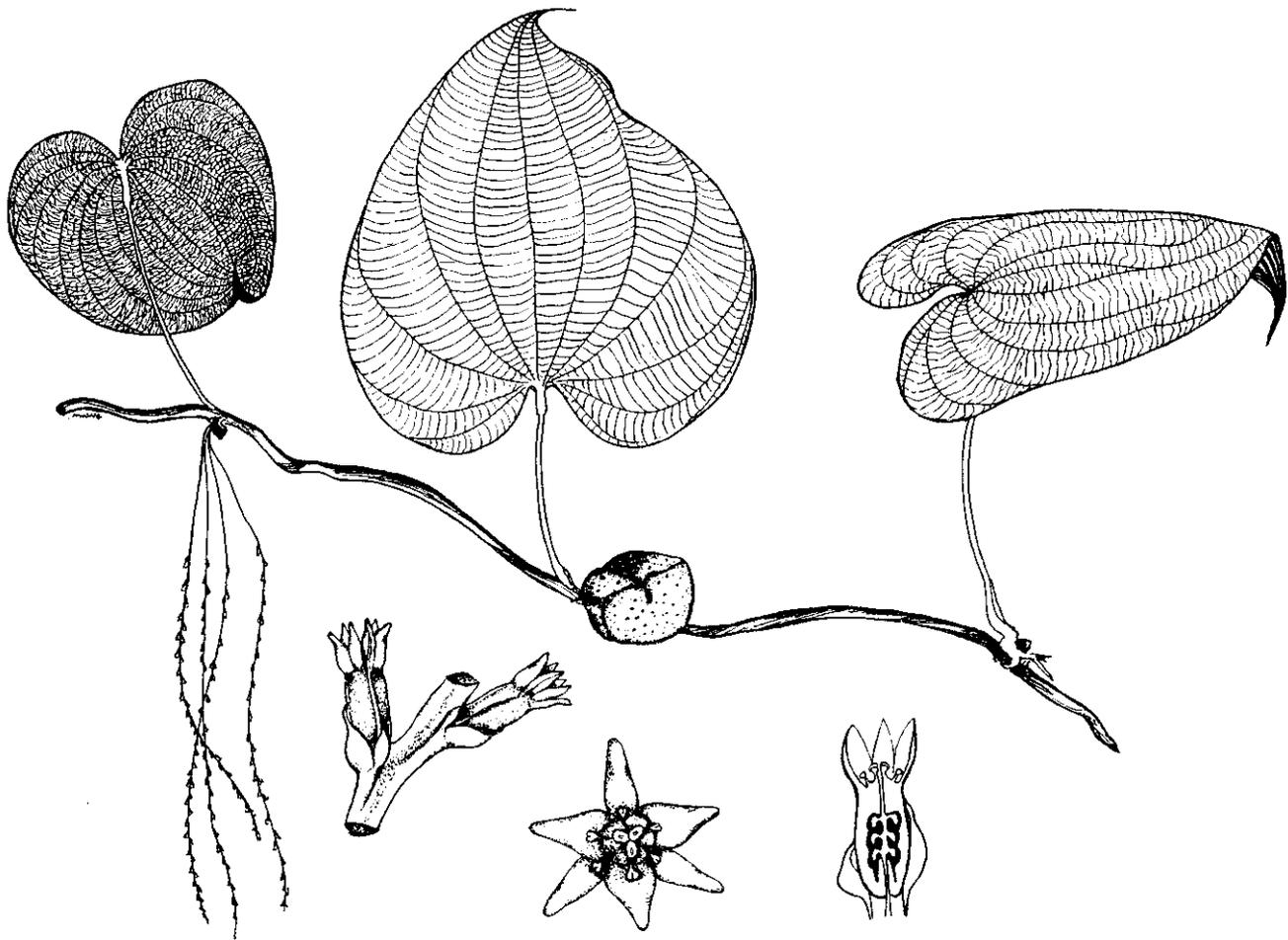


Illustration of marugu (*Dioscorea bulbifera*) adapted from: Tropical crops. J.W. Purseglove, 1979, Longman.

reduced from 500 grams to 400 grams and its price has rocketed to Ksh25 (US\$0.33). People living in the poorer areas such as the Tiriki, were amongst the first to drop this expensive item from their diet and look for local alternatives. Today, *marugu* is meeting their need. The Tiriki claim that a meal of *marugu* lasts longer in the stomach than wheat bread and shopkeepers in Ijevutulu, Ikamulembe and Imahanga villages are already blaming the rise of *marugu* for declining bread sales.

Marugu foods are being promoted in the main churches in Ijevutulu, Isigong'o, Ijamulongoji and Ijisasi. Churches in these areas are highly conservative. During their weekly services, they have periods for general announcements and it is during this time that farmers who grow *marugu* stand and announce to their congregations current prices and where *marugu* can be bought. This traditional form of communication saves farmers the expense of paying for advertisement and gets the message across to the right target group.

Milkmen also supply *marugu* to people as they move around the villages on their bicycles selling milk in the early morning dawn or just before dusk. Sometimes people are also informed about *marugu* during biweekly village meetings called to discuss local matters. It is clear that the revival and marketing of *marugu* in Tiriki is being done mainly through word of mouth and is very efficient.

Ezekiel Mutulia Shitiavai, a Tiriki farmer who lives in Bundolovo village in Kaimosi Division, plants and eats *marugu*

regularly. He explains that having a good meal of boiled *marugu* in the morning is a first step towards spiritual well-being. *Marugu* soothes the body. "If you visit a person", Shitiavai explains, "and they serve you with tea and *marugu*, then your visit is regarded a special occasion". He believes that efforts to encourage the sustainable use of *Dioscorea bulbifera* in Tiriki will lead to heightened use, widespread recognition and the preservation of this species. "The use of *marugu* is something for us to leave to posterity," he says.

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