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Ever heard of the ‘Ipomoean Revolution’? Or of the ‘Colocasian Revolution’ or the ‘Susian Revolution’? My guess is that you have not, unless you are a New Guinea specialist with an interest in roots and tubers. Perhaps it is not necessary for those of us who have a more general interest in the region to remember all three terms, but I suggest you try to remember at least the Ipomoean Revolution. Reading some of the essays in the book under review here would be a good starting point.

The book, an edited volume in folio format, with a refreshingly no-frills title, presents a range of contributions on the present status and history of the introduction and spread of the sweet potato on the islands of the Pacific and in New Zealand and New Guinea. The scientific name of the sweet potato is *Ipomoea batatas*, hence the term Ipomoean Revolution, shorthand for the rapid spread of the tuber and its far-reaching societal effects, particularly in the highlands of New Guinea.

It is now generally accepted that the sweet potato originated in the Americas, and was introduced in many areas of Asia after 1500, as part of the ‘Columbian exchange’. This is not a recent point of view; it was proposed as early as 1700 by the German-Dutch botanist Georg Everhard Rumph (aka Rumphius), who described and discussed a large number of plants growing in the Indonesian Archipelago and surrounding areas around that time. However, there is a growing consensus that the crop had reached many islands of Oceania prior to 1500, probably through the agency of Polynesians, who may have landed on South American shores as early as 1000 CE and who returned with the sweet potato in their baggage. It is no longer believed that the sweet potato arrived of its own accord, carried on sea currents, or that, as the scholar-adventurer Thor Heyerdahl attempted to demonstrate
in the late 1940s, people from America had introduced it in Oceania. Its prehistoric introduction by Polynesians in Oceania was proposed in a seminal publication by Douglas Yen, dated 1974, to which the volume under review can be seen as both a sequel and a tribute. In fact, Yen proposed a tripartite transfer, named after the terms used locally for the sweet potato. Thus he distinguished the prehistoric Kumara line, the Portuguese Batata or Batatas line, and the Spanish Camote or Kamote line. A few years earlier, Harold Conklin and Jacques Barrau had suggested plural introductions along these lines. Basically, this model has withstood the test of time.

Half the essays in this volume deal only with the Kumara varieties, both during their prehistoric introduction, and their later, historic spread, starting around the 1760s, when European and American explorers, whalers, and missionaries had reason to want to broaden the rather narrow resource base (taro, yam, coconut) of the islands of Oceania. Many of these essays show that the arrival and acceptance of the sweet potato led to population growth, particularly because it was possible to grow this crop in hitherto ‘empty’ areas, which were too arid, too high, or too infertile for other crops. The introduction of the sweet potato is also held to have led to higher returns to labour, which meant that a larger surplus became available, which could be used as ‘social capital’. That is at least implied in an (by Paul Wallin, Christopher Stevenson, and Thegn Ladefoged) on the possible influence of the introduction and spread of the sweet potato on the island of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) on the increased construction of monumental essay architecture – the famous giant heads. Thus, the spread of the sweet potato as an important staple crop – in some instances the most important one – led to intensification of land use, which, in the often vulnerable agro-ecosystems of the islands, could easily give rise to environmental problems.

The other half of the essays deal with New Guinea. It was regarding this area that James Watson suggested in a number of articles dating from the mid-1960s that the introduction of the sweet potato some 300 years ago had led to what he called the Ipomoean Revolution, particularly in the highlands. Although Watson has been rightly criticized for arguing that the sweet potato had turned the New Guinea highlanders from foragers into agriculturalists (most of them had known taro-based sedentary agriculture for ages), the notion of a transformation of the highlands in the wake of the spread of the sweet potato appears to be generally accepted now, even though not everyone believes it was a revolution in the sense of a sudden dramatic occurrence. Analogous to Watson’s notion of an Ipomoean Revolution, scholars have since suggested that there might have been a Colocasian (taro) and a Susian (pig) revolution, as it is now widely held that the introduction of taro several thousand years ago led to sedentarization of the highlanders, while expanded sweet potato cultivation made large-scale pig keeping possible, thus paving
the way for ceremonies and conflicts based on the exchange of pig meat (see the essay by David Boyd). Over the last hundred years or so, the sweet potato has been spreading in the lowlands as well, and for the same reasons as elsewhere: it is a crop that needs little moisture or care, and can grow in areas that are rather infertile, while it produces high yields per unit of land and labour. This enables people in the lowlands to spend less time on subsistence agriculture and more time on cash crops or wage labour.

The book opens with a good introduction and summary by Chris Ballard, and closes with an epilogue by Douglas Yen. A book with such varied contributions (agriculture, anthropology, archaeology, etymology, history) is necessarily uneven in quality. Although the value of many contributions can only be fully assessed by specialists, I can say that I found most of the essays informative and convincing. I will voice here only one complaint, and that is the lack of a comparative perspective, particularly regarding the rest of Asia. And finally, one mistake: Rumphius is said to have based his classification of the sweet potato on Linnaeus (essay by Yen, p. 182). When Rumphius died, in 1702, Linnaeus had yet to be born (1707).


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The period 1991-2001 addressed in the title of this book forms a crucial episode in the remarkable history of postwar Cambodia. In 1991 a UN-brokered ceasefire was proclaimed between the Vietnam-supported PRK (People’s Republic of Kampuchea) and the UN-recognized opposition. In the same year the Paris Peace Conference took place, and preparations for the UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) mission started. In 2001 the State of Cambodia was established under the dominance of the CPP (Cambodian People’s Party), and the power and charisma of its leader Hun Sen had become unchallengeable. In fact, this is the large question behind the book: How did Hun Sen gain control of the circumstances, nationally and internationally?

The book is much more than a chronology of events. It presents a penetrating analysis of what happened in Cambodian politics over the past twenty-five years. In this sense it goes far beyond most of the existing literature and turns Cambodia into a relevant general case. The author calls her approach...