

PRIMITIVE MAIZE WITH THE LEPCHAS

—J. K. THAPA

The determining factor regarding the maize plant being of the New World origin is that this plant was unknown in any part of the Old World before Columbus discovered America in 1492. Of course, there are other important factors to be also considered on the origin of maize plant.

Recently two Japanese scientists (Suto and Yoshida, 1956) referred to the statement recorded by the famous Chinese Naturalist, Li Shih-Chen that a pod like corn was introduced to China from India via Tibet in 1368. This date is questioned by other investigators who supposed that the time was about middle of the 16th century.

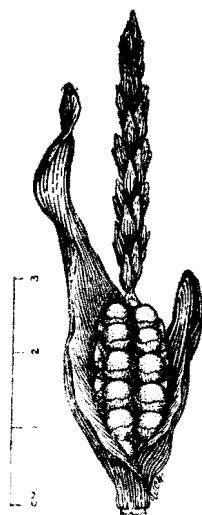
The date 1368 recorded by Li Shih-Chen cannot be ruled out. It is a fact that long before the discovery of the New World by Columbus, Buddhist Missionaries both Indians and Tibetans communicated between India and Tibet across the Himalayas, and commodities along with ideas travelled from India to Tibet. It is thus possible that the "pod like corn" was collected from one of the maize growing areas of the Himalayas rather than the plains in the South.

The Tibetan word Ma-rmos-pai-lo-tog (མར་མོས་པའི་ལོ་ཐོག) is invariably taken to mean maize particularly in Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim. According to Sarat Chandra Das (*Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p.949) the word means: "wild crop, crop grown without being cultivated; also maize (Yig)". The Tibetan reference 'Yig' (rgya-bod yig-tshang) dates back to a period before the discovery of America.

Thus the inference from Chinese as well as Tibetan records is clear that maize was not unknown in the Old World during the pre-Columbian era. The question whether the maize was introduced from the Old World to the New World or from the New World to the Old World will have to wait till the recently discovered archaeological evidence of pre-historic and proto-historic contacts between the two Worlds is fully studied.

One of the most primitive maize races in the world was revealed to two foreign scientists (E.W. Sprague and N.L. Dhawan) in various parts of Sikkim in 1962 (Vide Fig 1 and Fig 2). This living (or surviving) specimen bears, in the opinion of the present writer, the closest resemblance to the wild maize of which an actual specimen in fossil was uncovered (1960) in the lower levels of San Marcos Cave in Mexico. The paper entitled 'Domestication of Corn' (by Paul C. Mangelsdorf, Richard S. Mac Neish, Walten C. Galinat, published in *Science*, February 7, 1964, Vol. 143. No.3606, pages 538-545) contains a reconstruction of the wild corn from the fossil fragments as reproduced herewith:

Artist's reconstruction of wild corn based on actual specimens of cobs, husks, a fragment bearing male spikelets and kernels discovered in San Marcos cave. The fossils date back to 4000 B. C. (Courtesy : *Science* Washington, D. C.)



Also it is of interest to note that the edible coix is quite different from a number of hard-shelled coix collected in Sikkim. The Sikkimese name for maize and coix is the same (Kan-tsong=ཀཎ་སྟོང་) except that the latter possesses a prefix to indicate it as Devil's Maize.

Nearly all the plant hunters who explored these areas during the British regime were British and naturally noticed items of the local flora which had resemblance with their own; items like maize were not adequately studied. It is needless to say that the modern sophisticated discipline in which anthropology and economics are tools for palaeobotany and botany has not been tried in this part of the Old World and all the hilly areas of the South East Asia have not been surveyed by botanists interested in the origin of the maize.

SIKKIM PRIMITIVE MAIZE

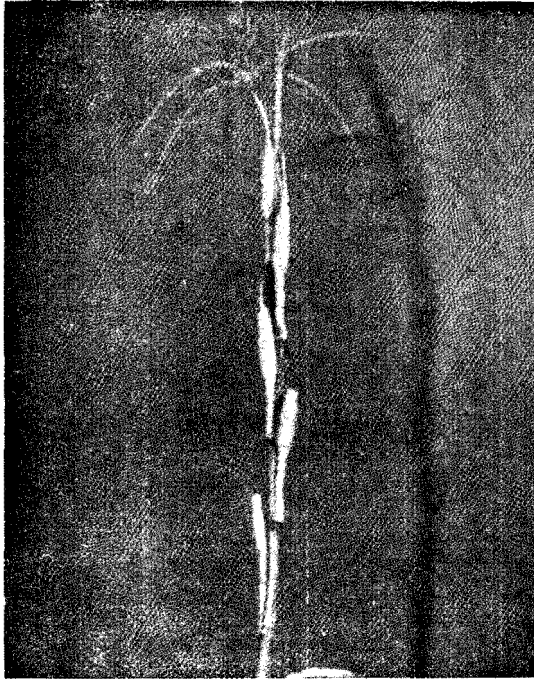


Fig. 1

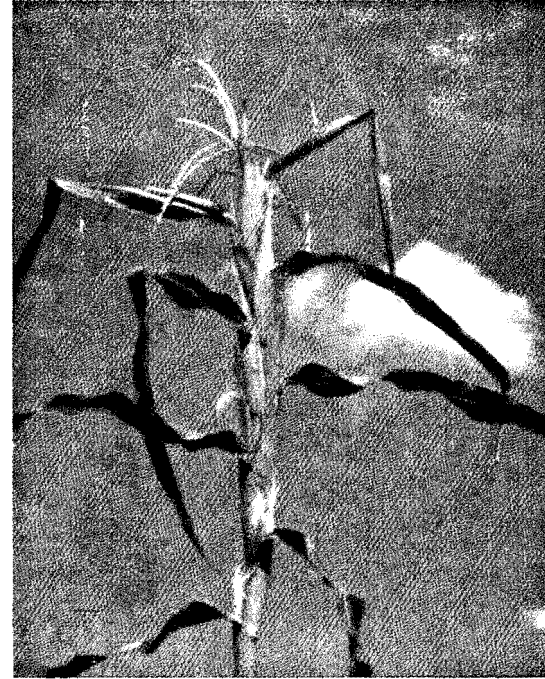


Fig. 2

Courtesy : ICAR Coordinated Maize Improvement Scheme

Exactly when and how maize was introduced to the hilly areas of the South East Asia, where people of the Tibeto-Burman stock are still practising 'Jhum' (Shifting) type of cultivation, is not known yet. It is a fact that in many of these areas, maize ears are offered to the deity before harvesting the crop. This offering of maize ears is indeed an ancient tribal custom, a kind of 'thanksgiving' offering, in the Eastern Himalayas. Thus, the Lepcha ritual of offering the ears of corn holds the key to this problem. It is no mere accident that though Sikkim is the Valley of Rice, Lepchas, Tsongs etc. place the highest premium on the ear of corn (maize) and not the ear of paddy (rice) in their tribal rituals inherited from prehistoric times.

On the basis of the above mentioned facts, there is more than an element of chance that adequate references to maize plant may be found in ancient Tibetan literature and archaeological remains in Himalayas and Trans-Himalayas.

Thus, one can look forward to discovery of the living specimen of the elusive 'Wild Corn' in some remote areas of the Eastern Himalayas in the near future.