


Fonio

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Scientific classification	
Kingdom:	Plantae
(unranked):	Angiosperms
(unranked):	Monocots
(unranked):	Commelinids
Order:	Poales
Family:	Poaceae
Genus:	<i>Digitaria</i>
Species:	<i>D. exilis</i>
Binomial name	
<i>Digitaria exilis</i> (Kippist) Stapf	
Synonyms	
<i>Paspalum exile</i> Kippist <i>Syntherisma exilis</i> (Kippist) Newbold	

Fonio is the term for cultivated grains in the *Digitaria* genus. These are notable in parts of West Africa in addition to one species in India. The grains are very small.

The name (borrowed by English from French) is from Wolof *foño* "*Digitaria exilis*," itself from one of the Mande languages (cf. Bambara *fini*).^[1]

Types

White fonio (*Digitaria exilis*)

White fonio (*D. exilis*), also called "hungry rice," is the most important of a diverse group of wild and domesticated *Digitaria* species that are harvested in the savannas of West Africa. Fonio has the smallest seeds of all species of millet. It has potential to improve nutrition, boost food security, foster rural development and support sustainable use of the land.

Fonio has continued to be important locally because it is both nutritious and one of the world's fastest growing cereals, reaching maturity in as little as six to eight weeks. It is a crop that can be relied on in semi-arid areas with poor soils, where rains are brief and unreliable. The grains are used in porridge and couscous, for bread, and for beer.

Some regions in which this crop is important are the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea, the Akposso area of Togo and Central Nigeria. In Togo, fonio (called *ɔva*) is primarily a women's crop; it and cowpeas are used to make a traditional dish.

The small grains make it difficult and time-consuming to remove the husk. Traditional methods include pounding it in a mortar with sand (then separating the grains and sand) or "popping" it over a flame and then pounding it (which yields a toasted color grain; this technique is used among the Akposso). The invention of a simple fonio husking machine offers an easier mechanical way to dehusk.

Black fonio (*Digitaria iburua*)

Black fonio (*D. iburua*) is a similar crop grown in Nigeria, Niger, Togo, and Benin.

Raishan

Raishan (*D. cruciata* var. *esculenta*) is a minor cereal, only grown in the Khasi Hills of northeast India, with glutinous flour used to make bread or porridge.

Mythology

According to the mythology of the Dogon people of Mali, among whom it is known as *pō tolo*, the supreme creator of the universe, Amma, made the entire universe by exploding a single grain of fonio, located inside the "egg of the world".

References

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Further reading

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