

ETHIOPIAN CIVET

(Civettictis civetta)



Hugh F. Rouk

and

Hailu Mengesha

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

Experiment Station Bulletin No. 21

IMPERIAL ETHIOPIAN COLLEGE

OF AGRICULTURE AND MECHANICAL ARTS

P.O. BOX 138 DIRE DAWA, ETHIOPIA

MAY 1963

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One of the most expensive products of Ethiopia, perhaps second only to gold, is civet (Amharic: *Zibad*), the secretion from the musk glands of the Civet cat (Amharic: *Tirin*) (*Civettictis civetta*). This material has been collected and exchanged as a choice item of trade since ancient times. History reflects that the trade in civet was well established before the time of the Queen of Sheba. Among the prized gifts presented to King Solomon during the Queen's historic visit were frankincense, myrrh spices, ivory and civet, according to Ethiopian history.

This material is used as a base for perfumes and although synthetic materials have been developed in recent years, Ethiopian civet continues to be much in demand. Perhaps the greatest demand comes from France, a country noted for her perfume industry. Other countries such as the United States, England, Switzerland and Germany are importers of Ethiopian civet.

Civet is closely associated with the same trade channels dealing in such commodities as coffee, tea, and spices. It has no doubt been an item of commerce with countries of southern and eastern Asia since trade was established between the two continents centuries ago.

During the era of the barter system in Ethiopia, civet, gold, silver and diamonds were used in foreign trade. This was particularly true of trade between Ethiopia, Yemen, and Egypt. These precious items were also used in domestic trade for the purchase of cereals, cloth, and other merchandise.

Another indication of the value of civet is the Ethiopian custom of naming a daughter "Zibadi," meaning "my civet." The name has

the connotation of expressing "my most valuable possession." Likewise, a man dealing in the civet trade used to be given special consideration and respect. To some degree, this practice continues.

It is believed that gold, honey, and civet are responsible for the beginning of weights and measures in Ethiopia. The Amharic word "*woket*" means ounce and is associated with ancient inscriptions concerning these valuable commodities. It is believed that the high value caused the traders to develop a more precise system of weights and measures than was generally employed with less expensive items.

In addition to use as a perfume base, civet is also used in the preparation of certain medicines by the village medicine men.

The peak year for civet production in Ethiopia was 1954 when 61,199 ounces valued at Eth. \$674,000 were exported. New techniques are being developed to test civet for purity and quality and with better market controls, the civet industry should continue to grow.

This publication is written in order to give the reader a better understanding of this important product of Ethiopia and the animal which produces it.

Description of the Civet Cat

The Ethiopian Civet cat (*Civettictis civetta*) belongs to a family of small carnivorous mammals called *Viverridae* or Mongoose family. It is related to both the hyena and the cats. Their family histories converge when traced back to the Tertiary period. The Ethiopian Civet cat

