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Devoted to Past, Present, and Future Uses of Plants by People

Ackee in Jamaica
P. 190

Inside . . .

Collections Corner: Comparing Uses and Collections: The Example of Dodonaea viscosa Jacq., P. 184
Plant Portraits: Triticum durum, Parched Corn (Frikeh) of the Bible? P. 187

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"Those that do not smile will kill me:
The ethnobotany of the ackee in Jamaica

Akee is the fruit of a beautiful evergreen tree of tropical West Africa, beloved by Jamaicans, though they consider it deadly poisonous if it is improperly harvested or prepared. Tradition says before the fruit is harvested, it must open on the tree naturally, i.e., it must ‘smile’ or ‘laugh.'

Young fruiting branch of ackee (Blighia sapida K. Konig).

Flowering branch of ackee.

A specimen of the ackee tree at the U.S.D.A. Plant Introduction Station at Coral Gables, Miami, Florida. Note the "poisonous fruit" sign.

FOR JAMAICANS, KNOWING THAT THE ACKEE (Blighia sapida K. Konig) IS THE ANSWER TO THIS RIDDLE IS NOT SIMPLY AMUSEMENT; IT IS LITERALLY A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH. ACKEE IS THE FRUIT OF A BEAUTIFUL EVERGREEN TREE OF TROPICAL WEST AFRICA, BELOVED BY JAMAICANS, EVEN THOUGH THEY CONSIDER IT DEEPLY POISONOUS IF IT IS IMPROPERLY HARVESTED OR PREPARED. TRADITION SAYS BEFORE THE FRUIT IS HARVESTED, IT MUST OPEN ON THE TREE NATURALLY, I.E., IT MUST "SMILE" OR "LAUGH." (FIG. 1). THIS CLEAR ASSOCIATION BETWEEN OPEN ACKEES, SMILING, AND WELL BEING IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ACKEE THEMES IN JAMAICAN CULTURE. ITS EXPRESSION IN ORAL TRADITIONS, SUCH AS THE RIDDLE ABOVE, REVEALS WHAT JAMAICANS MUST KNOW TO EAT ACKEES SAFELY (RASHFORD 1996).


NOT SURPRISINGLY, THERE ARE ACKEE PLACE-NAMEs SUCH AS ACKEE WALK IN KINGSTON AND ACKEE PARADE IN ST. THOMAS. THERE ARE ALSO ACKEE BUSINESS-NAMEs, ACKEE TREE HIDEOUT AND JERK PORK CENTER, FOR EXAMPLE, IS ABOUT TWO MILES FROM KINGSTON ALONG THE NEWCASTLE ROAD; ACKEE TREE PUB IS IN GRANGE HILL, WESTMORELAND, AND THE ACKEE COTTAGE, WHICH DESCRIBES ITSELF AS "A CHARMING, LUXURIOUS VERSION OF A GENUINE JAMAICAN HOME," IS ALSO IN WESTMORELAND, LOOKING NEGRIL BEACH. THE ULTIMATE ACKEE PLACE-NAME, HOWEVER, IS THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE CAPITAL CITY OF KINGSTON, AND OF JAMAICA AS A WHOLE, AS THE "BIG ACKEE." I BECAME AWARE OF THIS IN 1983 WHEN I SAW THE BILLBOARD IN OCHO RIOS ILLUSTRATED IN FIG. 2. THE "BIG ACKEE" THEME NOW APPEARS IN PUBLICATIONS (e.g., ULRICH 1998:121), ON TEE SHIRTS, AND ON A POSTCARD OF A PAINTING BY PHILLIP HENRY (FIG. 3).

THE ACKEE IS CLEARLY OF GREAT IMPORTANCE IN JAMAICAN CULTURE, AND THIS SURVEY DOCUMENTING ITS IMPORTANCE IS INTENDED TO FILL A SIGNIFICANT GAP IN THE CURRENT LITERATURE. IT IS BASED ON FIELD RESEARCH DONE FROM 1975 TO 1976, AND AT VARIOUS TIMES SINCE MAY OF 1989. IT ALSO INCORPORATES MY EXPERIENCE OF GROWING UP IN JAMAICA.

DESCRIPTION

Ackee is the most prominent member of three species of African trees belonging to the genus Blighia in the Sapindaceae family (Bailey and Bailey 1976:167; Keay 1989). It grows 8-15 m in height, with a moderately dense crown and large pinnate leaves. Each leaf is comprised of 3-5 pairs of glossy, light green, elliptic leaflets, 6-18 cm long and 5-7 cm wide. Two or more times a year, small fragrant white flowers appear on axillary racemes, and from these develop showy pendant clusters of large, leathery, pear-shaped fruits that are 7-10 cm long. At first, they become various shades of red or yellow as they mature, and are often red with flashes of yellow, or yellow with flashes of red. The fruit splits lengthwise into three sections when ripe starting at the apex, and each section contains a large round black seed that is smooth and shiny. Each seed is attached at its base to a

ECONOMIC BOTANY 55(2) pp. 190-211, 2001
fleshy yellow aril some 4 mm in length, oblong in shape, glossy in appearance, oily to the touch, and like marrow when cooked. The cooked aril has a mild taste of its own that is often described as delicate or bland.

Although the ackee is a highly variable species (Stair and Sidrak 1992:11), Jamaicans traditionally distinguish two kinds: the “hard” variety, called “cheese ackee,” which is preferred because it does not disintegrate in cooking, and the “soft” variety, called “butter ackee” (Cassidy 1971:343), which is cooked in special ways to prevent the arils from breaking up. The name cheese ackee is not common in speech. Though known to many Jamaicans and mentioned in publications (e.g., Davidson 1971:28; Senior 1983:2), it is not included in Jamaica Talk (Cassidy 1971), and it only appears in the “Supplement” to the second edition of the Dictionary of Jamaican English (Cassidy and Le Page 1980:493).

The ackee grows readily from planted or incidentally dispersed seeds, and can also be propagated by root suckers and stem cuttings (Stair and Sidrak 1992). Many Jamaicans reported “saving” wild seedlings that sprang up in favorable places, or in places where they did not interfere, and some said they had transplanted wild seedlings to preferred locations. Trees start bearing as early as four years old, and at maturity produce large quantities of fruits annually, especially from mid-winter through early spring, and from mid-summer through early autumn. Although in Jamaica the ackee is relatively free of pests and diseases, the tree is attacked by scale insects and beetles, and the fruit by fruit

**Introduction to Jamaica**

The ackee was introduced into Jamaica in the eighteenth century and is now found island-wide from sea level to about 900 m (Adams 1972:441). It is one of the most familiar trees around Jamaican homes, especially in backyards, side yards and along fences. It also grows by roadsides, in fields and pastures, and on the grounds of public and private institutions (Edwards 1961; Davidson 1971:28).

The earliest account of its introduction was published by Bryan Edwards as an appendix to his book *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1793). This appendix was a catalogue of the plants in the “magnificent orchard” of his friend Hinton East, an Oxford-educated Jamaican from an established creole family who returned to the island around the mid-eighteenth century to practice law. East became an influential figure in Jamaica from the 1770s until his death in 1792, and he is generally recognized as one of the most important participants in the early history of plant introduction to the island (Webster 1965:5; Eyre 1966:16; Powell 1972, 1973). Edwards says East had promised to “favor him” with a catalogue of the plants in his garden, i.e., an *Hortus Eastensis*. Yet East died in 1792 and the task fell to Dr. Bronought, an individual described by Edwards (1793:189) as “a very eminent and learned physician and botanist.”

In *Hortus Eastensis*, Broughton records the name *ackee*. In 1851, Bigelow identified the *ackee* as “the tree which bears fruit, and the north winds are extremely injurious to it.” In 1851, Bigelow identified the *ackee* as “a tree native to Jamaica” (Adams 1971a:15, 1972:441). This is so despite frequent claims that in the “Caribbean” it is a “prized food” (Kingsbury 1889) or a “popular dish” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1933:187); or claims that in the “West Indies” it is a “great delicacy” (Irvine 1930:56); “in great demand” (Sturrock 1940:111), or “much esteemed” (Hedrick 1972:96). In fact, given the *ackees’* dispersal in the neotropics, it could well be regarded as an indicator species for Jamaican connections, since its spread in the region has been greatly influenced by economic migration, and by travel in association with education and tourism (Hill 1952:256–7; Standley 1968:240). The tree has also been dispersed in the neotropics and around the world, as a curiosity, ornamental, and garden specimen (Williams 1928; Arnold 1944:4; Oakes and Buncher 1981:15; Morton 1981:485, 1987:270).

**Practical Uses**

**Food**

The *ackee*‘s edible fruit is the tree’s most important practical value for Jamaicans, and as earlier noted, it must open on the tree naturally before harvesting (Chase, Landen, and Soliman 1990; Brown et al. 1992). Acekees that are not picked soon after opening spoil before falling, or are eaten by birds or other animals. The fruits are borne in clusters, and since all the fruits in a cluster do not open simultaneously, each is harvested individually, either by hand (with young trees and low branches) or with a reaping stick. Dislodging the fruits by shaking the tree, or by throwing stones, sticks or other objects, was described as time consuming, dangerous to people, destructive of property, and damaging to the aril. The major exception to traditional practice is the canning industry. “Fruits for processing,” writes Pierre (1974:114), “are harvested by vigorously shaking the branches of laden trees to dislodge the fruits . . . [these unopened fruits are placed on racks . . . and from these fruits are collected for processing] only when they open . . . With this procedure, it is estimated that losses of about 40–60% occur” (See also Davidson 1971:29).

Table 1 compares the composition of *ackee* to other fruits and vegetables which are also considered as “vegetable marrow” in the literature.

*Raw Fruits*. Although most Jamaicans had only heard of eating raw *ackee*, there were some who ate it, and others who saw or knew someone who did. It is clearly misleading to state that the fruit is “poisonous” (Sturrock 1940:39) or “much esteemed” (Hedrick 1972:96). In fact, given the *ackee’s* dispersal in the neotropics, it could well be regarded as an indicator species for Jamaican connections, since its spread in the region has been greatly influenced by economic migration, and by travel in association with education and tourism (Hill 1952:256–7; Standley 1968:240). The tree has also been dispersed in the neotropics and around the world, as a curiosity, ornamental, and garden specimen (Williams 1928; Arnold 1944:4; Oakes and Buncher 1981:15; Morton 1981:485, 1987:270).

**Table 1. Composition of Fruits is Edible Portion of One Pound, as Purchased, Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (1974–75).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Zanthoxylum pendulus</th>
<th>Aegle marmelos</th>
<th>Citrus x limon</th>
<th>Prunus domestica</th>
<th>Ficus carica</th>
<th>Hura crepitans</th>
<th>Cocos nucifera</th>
<th>Vigna unguiculata</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Z. p.</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. m.</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. l.</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. d.</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. c.</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. c.</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
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<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. u.</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Z. p.* = Zanthoxylum pendulus; *A. m.* = Aegle marmelos; *C. l.* = Citrus x limon; *P. d.* = Prunus domestica; *F. c.* = Ficus carica; *H. c.* = Hura crepitans; *C. n.* = Cocos nucifera; *V. u.* = Vigna unguiculata.

In conclusion, *ackee* is a tree with a long history in Jamaica. It has a long history of use and importance, and its fruit is an important food source for Jamaicans. The fruit is also important for its role in the region’s history and culture, and its dispersal in the neotropics and around the world. However, it is important to note that the fruit is not without its challenges, and that the practice of harvesting and processing it requires careful attention to avoid waste and loss.

**Fig. 3. Illustrations of the “big ackee” theme on a tee-shirt, and on a postcard from a painting by Philip Henry (upper left hand corner).**
informal occasions. It is not even considered a traditional snack.

Ackee and Saltfish. Kaplan et al. (1976:129) express the opinion of many authors when they say there are hundreds of recipes that call for ackee (e.g., Cannon 1965:190; Facey 1993:102). This is a misleading impression one gets from Jamaicans when they are casually asked about the different ways of preparing ackee. Many informants said “everybody” had their own way, noting that for some it was their individual practice while for others it was their family custom. Cookbooks also contribute to this misleading impression with their recipes for such things as ackee appetizers, fillings, dips, and pastries.

Ackee is traditionally prepared in several ways (Adams 1971b:30). The most common is ackee and saltfish, described by the Jamaican poet and writer, Olive Senior, as one of the island’s “greatest delicacies” (1983:2). Although enjoyed for breakfast, lunch and dinner, as well as at any time, ackee and saltfish is often identified as Jamaica’s “favorite” or “national” breakfast dish (Harris 1912:189; Harris 1991:498). It is served on a Saturday and Sunday morning. This is clearly evident in “Linsted Market,” one of the island’s most popular folk songs. Ackee and saltfish is also served on festive occasions. “New Year’s Day,” writes Hayward (1996:101), “starts with a breakfast of saltfish and ackee.”

“Dressing” and “rying” are the common ways of preparing ackee and saltfish. In both cases, the arils are separated from the pods, all traces of the seeds and the red fiber found in the arils are carefully removed, and the arils are washed and boiled. The saltfish is flaked after it has been soaked or boiled to reduce the amount of salt and facilitate the removal of the skin and bones. Then “salt pork” (which is traditional) is fried in its own fat until crisp, and to the pork fat is added coconut oil and seasonings that include thyme, aconite, scallion, tomatoes, and Scotch bonnet pepper. With dressed ackee and saltfish, the seasoning is poured over the ackee, which is either mixed with the saltfish or layered on top. The dish is sprinkled with black pepper and served, or according to some informants, it is left on the stove or fire to “simmer,” “blend,” or “keep warm” (Jamaica Agricultural Society 1957:19). With fried ackee and saltfish, the seasoning ingredients are only partially fried.

Then the saltfish and parboiled arils are added, either in layers, or gently mixed in, and the cooking is completed by frying.

Variations of the traditional ackee and saltfish dish have developed from individual experimentation and from substitutions made necessary by high prices, shortages, and dietary restrictions (Fig. 4). In fact, some informants said one or the other (or both) factors have increased the variety of ackee dishes they enjoy. For others, experimentation and substitutions have resulted in an exclusive preference for something other than the traditional ackee and saltfish. Common saltfish substitutions were pickled mackerel, canned mackerel, red herring, salt pork, corn pork, ham, ham fat, bacon, “chicken back,” frankfurter, and canned sausage. In addition to some of the above, other combinations noted by Donaldson (1993:66) include salted fresh fish, sardines, lobster, and shrimps. Hayward (1996:10) suggests smoked salmon. While some informants added saltshrub (Solanum torvum Sw.) to their ackee and saltfish, Beckwith (1929:141) identified saltshrub as a “substitute” for saltfish.

Fried Ackee. Plain fried ackee has never been popular in Jamaica, despite reports of one person eating it dating back to the nineteenth century (Lunan 1814:9). It is prepared by frying either raw or parboiled ackee, an important distinction that is not often made in the literature. Kingsbury (1888), for example, states that “it was their custom in water reduces the [ackee’s] toxicity if the water is discarded,” but many prefer akkee fried.” This suggests that references to “fried ackee” are always to raw ackee fried, and this is not the case. Only one person ate raw ackee fried, and it is reported in only one cookbook (Miller and Henry 1989:33). Others said they never prepared it, saw it prepared, or knew of anyone who prepared it in this way.

Lunan (1814:49) offered one of the earliest reports of parboiled fried ackee, and it is also mentioned in cookbooks (Anonymous 1960:26; Slater 1965:72-73; Walsh and McCarthy 1995:93). This dish is prepared like ackee and saltfish but without the saltfish. Several informants preferred it, and a few said they ate it only when saltfish was too expensive, or when saltfish or the usual substitutes were unavailable. One person ate parboiled fried ackee for dietary reasons, and Rastafarians favored it because of their vegetarian preference, their love of natural rather than preserved foods, and their opposition to salt (Evans 1981; Osborne 1992).

Boiled Ackee. Although Sullivan (1908:70) includes boiled “ackee on toast” among “the every day dishes which come under immediate notice” in Jamaica, few informants said they preferred it. For others there were special circumstances. One individual ate boiled ackee as a child, but only when she and her friends were on summer holiday “bush outings.” Ackee, she said, was readily available and easy to prepare. Another had it only when saltfish and her preferred substitutes were unavailable. Rastafarians, however, gave the same reasons for eating boiled ackee as they did for eating parboiled fried ackee.

Ackee Soup. “You tek ackee boil soup, gal you want fe come kill me?” This fragment of a Jamaican folk song, which Hill (1952:255) erroneously identified as a Jamaican proverb, suggests that ackee is never used for soup and this is not the case. According to Kaplan et al. (1976:128), ackee “is used often in soups.” Lunan (1814:9) gives one of the earliest accounts of ackee as a “wholesome ingredient in soup,” and this dish has been reported in cookbooks and other publications since (Sullivan 1908:5; Harris 1912:181; Fawcett and Rendle 1926:57; Williams 1954:22; Abrahams 1957:203; Seafort 1962:53; Oritz 1973:36; Benghitis 1985:43; Osborne 1992:40).

Nevertheless, “ackee soup is not as common as Kaplan et al. suggest. Although Oritz (1973:36) gives a recipe for ackee soup in The Complete Cookbook of the Caribbean, she explains: “Our cook, Annie, used to make a wonderful ackee soup, which I have never come across anywhere but in her kitchen. I suspect she invented it, using broken ackee left over from the salt fish and ackee that characterized our Fridays.” Likewise, Hayward (1996:12) indicates that her recipe for ackee soup was that of Air Jamaica’s chef Lenox Bailey. It is clear that ackee soup does not rank with known Jamaican favorites like pepper pot, fish tea, mannish mane, beef soup, red peas, breadfruit, and salt fish. A few informants did not know that ackee was used for soup. Of the many who did, most had only heard of it, and two remembered having it, though that was long ago.

Ackee and Rice. Rice, historically a largely imported staple is a highly esteemed member of the great variety of starchy consumables in Jamaica, and plain and mixed rice dishes are very popular. Topping the list of mixed rice dishes is “rice and peas,” a favorite among Sunday and special occasions that is jokingly referred to as Jamaica’s coat-of-arms (Cassidy 1971:197). Also popular are “pumpkin rice” and “seasoned rice” (which traditionally is rice cooked with saltfish). That ackee cooked with rice—recognized dish is evident in cookbooks (e.g., Facey 1993:102). It is also evident in the Ministry of Health public service warning that it “is dangerous to prepare dishes like ackee and rice by boiling both foods together in the same water” (Daily Gleaner, February 6, 1977). There are two recognized ackee-rice dishes: plain ackee and rice, and ackee-seasoned rice. Most informants were familiar with ackee cooked with rice. Some had eaten both dishes, while others had eaten one or the other version of it. Despite widespread familiarity, however, ackee cooked...
with rice is not as popular as rice and peas and pumpkin rice.

Roasted Ackee. Williams (1954:22) reports that ackee is sometimes roasted in Jamaica, and Cannon (1965:190) states that of the many ways of preparing ackee, roasting for her was "the most exciting of all." Yet, many informants had never heard of people roasting ackee in Jamaica. Of the five who had, two had only heard of it, two had eaten it, and only one prepared it regularly. Senior (1986:personal communication) thinks roasted ackee was probably better known in the days when Jamaicans cooked on open fires (a practice that is still common, especially in rural areas). She writes, "I recall people simply throwing ackee on the hot coals until they sizzled and blackened a bit; lots of other food was prepared that way for snacking."

Ackee Stuffed Breadfruit. In the culinary competition of the 1970 Festival, students of Vauxhall Junior Secondary School in Kingston offered a recipe for ackee-stuffed breadfruit titled "Jamaica's Favourite." Four informants had eaten this dish, though many knew of it. Recipes for ackee-stuffed breadfruit appear under a variety of names in Caribbean cookbooks (Brandon 1963:48-9; Ortiz 1973:250; Spence 1981:24; Benghait 1985:65), and some authors identify other fillings such as fried pork, minced meat, or sausage meat.

Ackee Run Down. "Jamaica run-dung" is the title of Cleary's cookbook (1970). "Run-dung" (i.e., run down) is a popular dish mentioned in the Dictionary of Jamaican English (Cassidy and Liddell 1981) and in many Caribbean Cookbooks (e.g., Spence 1981:13; Benghait 1985:80). It is prepared by grating a "dry" coconut and extracting the "milk" with water. The milk (with the usual seasonings) is traditionally cooked with macaroon, or with salt or sherry, but other ingredients include saltfish, fresh fish, crab, shrimp, "jangle" (the river prawn Macrourous jamaicensis), lobster, or vegetables (Spence 1981:10). Several informants said rundown "can meddle with any thing," but only a Portlant reported eating ackee and saltfish rundown. A Kingston Rastafarian said his community often had ackee rundown without saltfish, and Ebanks (1981) gives two versions of this dish in The Rastafari Cook Book.

Ackee Fritters. Sullivan (1908:13) and Slater (1965:73) present recipes for ackee fritters but only one informant routinely prepared it.

Ackee and saltfish is now a filling for patties (Ortiz 1973:15; Goldman 1992:43) and pies (Hawkes 1968a:16; Meeks 1970:19; Benghait 1985:77; DeWitt, Wilan and Stock 1996:54-55). Recipes for ackee soufle and curried ackee are common, as are recipes for various combinations of ackee and cheese, and ackee and eggs. Other ackee dishes include ackee and calaloo spread (Roberts 1987:5), ackee-stuffed choko (Walsh and McCarthy 1995), "turner comreal with ackee and saltfish" (National Children's Home 1995:15), ackee and taro (Hawkes 1968a:16), ackee croquettes (Roberts 1987:32), ackee salad (Miller and Henry 1989:37), and stewed ackee (Osborne 1992:74).

Market Value

For Jamaicans with ackee trees, harvesting the fruit for household consumption and gift giving are two of the tree's most important practical uses. For many, however, selling ackees is also important (see cover illustration). The fruit is offered year-round along roadsides and in markets, and I have also seen it for sale in Kingston supermarkets. For example, in August 2000, the ackee with the seeds still attached were being sold in plastic bags at Hi-Lo supermarket in Liguanea. Over the past eight years, Lean Hpp Supermarket in Twin Gates Plaza, has also been selling similarly packed ackees. Two cashiers at Lean Hpp said "it was mostly foreigners" who bought it. "Clean ackee" refers to fruits without the seeds and red fiber, and Welcome Supermarket in Liguanea, sells clean ackee frozen in plastic bags. (Many Jamaicans now clean, parboil and freeze their ackees, and it is plentiful.)

The export of canned ackees beginning in the 1950s is now a lucrative trade (Davidson 1971: 28). There are even newspaper reports of processors and exporters who cannot get enough ackee to meet the demand (Davidson 1971:28; Anonymous 1976). The primary markets are Canada and the United Kingdom, and the fruit is also exported to Antigua and Barbuda, Turks and Caicos Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, Bahamas, and Barbados (Dixon-Chambers 1989). In 1972, the United States Department of Agriculture banned the importation of ackee from Jamaica until the Jamaican government develops a reliable and efficient method to measure the amount of hypoglycin in the fruit, and determines which levels are safe for human consumption (see Robins 1992). Because the United States is an important market, the ban is a significant loss for Jamaican farmers, food processors, and exporters. It is also a great disappointment for ackee lovers in America.

Health

For Jamaicans, although the word "bush" is used to distinguish wild plants from cultivated plants, and weeds from crops, it is also the preferred term for vegetation in general, and for any plant or plant-part, especially branches and leaves. Hence, the term "bush medicine" for various ailments, and the terms "bush doctor" or "bush man" are associated with a variety of traditional plant-based religious specialists for whom there are many names (Cassidy and Le Page 1980:84). The most common Jamaican bush treatments are decoctions and infusions called "tea," as well as baths, rubs, plasters and tonics, and although the ackee is used in these ways, it is not among Jamaica's most familiar medicinal plants. Ackee remedies are not mentioned in well-known popular and scholarly accounts of the island's herbal tradition (Beckwith 1927, 1929; Steggerda 1929; Lowe 1972; Robinson 1982).

Rubs. Prompted by a university-wide investigation into ackee poisoning, Asprey and Thornton (who were then with the Botany Department of the University of the West Indies) published a study in the West Indian Medical Journal in which they identified 160 Jamaican medicinal plants including the ackee (1953, 1954, 1955a,b). It became the only work cited in most subsequent reports of the ackee's medicinal use in Jamaica (Campbell 1953:167; Morton 1981:485; Armstrong 1990:343).

In part two of their four-part study, Asprey and Thornton reported that "[in some parts of Jamaica] ackee leaves are boiled to make a 'rub for pains' (1954:21). A person said it was used to treat "disseased head," and several informants said it was good for "ringworm" and "liver spots" (one person said salt was added to treat liver spots). An informant from Harkers Hall, St. Catherine, said her father "would cut young ackees and rub the sap on animals to treat skin conditions. It was goats and pigs mostly."

Leaf Decoctions and Infusions. In part two, Asprey and Thornton (1954:21) also noted that

Fig. 5. A cartoon by Leon Hinds illustrating the changing cultural significance of ackee and saltfish in the national diet (Wiliams 1991:47).
a “tea” made with ackee leaves was used for colds, and they cited Webster (1931-35) and Dalziel (1937). They reported in part four that the use of ackee tea as a cold remedy in Jamaica was “confirmed,” and that the tea with salt added was used as a “mouthwash for incipient pyorrhea” (1935b:152). A similar account comes from Lisa Kolber, a Peace Corps worker who wrote an unpublished manuscript titled “Medicinal Plants Used in the Central Region of Jamaica: A Preliminary Report” (1983). She reports the use of an extract of the leaves and stem to treat ringworm in Clarendon, and notes that in St. Elizabeth and Manchester, a “pinch of salt” is added to the tea to treat colds. Despite these reports, ackee tea does not appear to be widely used in Jamaica. Nevertheless, many informants were familiar with it, and one, a market vendor, said “the ackee leaf can boil tea, but not when the tree is blossoming.” In addition to colds, one informant said it was also good for “upset stomach,” and another had heard that it was good for “sleep and appetite.”

Armstrong (1990:342) says the root is “boiled for pain,” but there are no other reports of this. Bush (1935b:152) believes ackee leaves have medicinal value, they are also used in the preparation of bath baths (Hall-Alleyne 1996:17). This is a significant since therapeutic bathing in the sea, mineral springs and herbal preparations is important in traditional Jamaican healthcare (Milton 1974:100; Barrett 1973, 1976; Cassidy and L: Page 1980:84). A bush bath, writes Sullivan (1908:87), is “considered absolutely necessary after fevers or other illnesses,” and she provides an early account of the use of ackee leaves in combination with other medicinal plants (see also Pullen-Burry 1903: 141; Benghat 1985).

So, although the ackee was not included. Long’s eighteenth century list of four “vegetable soaps” indicates that the use of plants for washing has a long history in Jamaica (1774-857). In the early nineteenth century, Lunn mentions this use of the ackee, writing, soting in his discussion of the fruit that the “husk lathers and washes like soap” (1814, Additions to I:9). Many informants were aware of this. Two had used ackee when soap was unavailable, and there was a report of an individual who washed only with ackee. The Rastafarian, I-1-fons, told the anthropologist Homiak (1995:148) that in his community, they would wash with “cicrace [Momordica char

FENCE POSTS

Long (1774:859) identified 14 plants that were used to make fences in eighteenth century Jamaica. These included trees that served as live fence posts, and several species of trees, shrubs and other growth forms that were used—and are still being used—to form thick, often impenetrable hedges called “bush fences.” Ackee trees are common along Jamaican fences for reasons that are not always clear (Davidson 1971:28; Morton 1990:407). In some cases they predominate the fence. In other cases the tree is incidentally dispersed by people and animals throughout the settlement environment, and survive along fences (and other places) where they do not interfere with human activities. Ackee is also planted in association with fences. There are fence-lined ackee orchards in southern St. Catherine where the tree is secondarily used as a live fence post. On one estate in eastern St. Thomas, ackee trees are regularly cut back to serve only as live fence-posts, even though the species traditionally used include such trees as the hog plum (Spondias mombin L.), Spanish macheke (Erythrina poepiggiana [Walp.] O. E. Cook), and especially the grow stake (Gliciridica sepium [Jacq.] Kuntz ex Griseb.).

INSPIRATIONAL USES

ORAL TRADITIONS

The ackee is featured in the music, literature, visual arts and oral traditions of the Jamaicans, and the oral traditions in which it appears include proverbs, riddles, words-games, folktales, traditional beliefs, humor and popular expressions. Proverbs. “Ackee lub fat, ochra lub salt” is one of only two ackee proverbs, and it extols the virtue of tolerance. As Cundall and Anderson (1972:13) explain: “Ackees are tasty fried in fat and okras are insipid without salt.” The second is the Jamaican version of the familiar “half-a-loaf” proverb. “One peg of ackee is better than none at all.” A student from the parish of Manchester reported it to Eloise Rhone, a Kingston teacher, and said her grandparents and others often used it.

Riddles. A riddle is a contest of wit—a challenge to identify something that is skillfully disguised in a misleading or enigmatic statement or question. The answer is amusing because of its surprising ingenuity. There are twelve ackee riddles, and all are anthropomorphic representations based on the open or closed fruit and its vivid colors. The riddle of the “smiling wife” with which this paper began is the only one that focuses on the analogy between open and closed fruits, and safe and deadly circumstances. Of the other eleven, the first ten listed below involve colors. Only number eleven is based on both open and closed fruits as well as colors. Although this riddle is associated with death, open and closed fruits are analogous to eyes, not to safe and dangerous circumstances. The following four riddles were published in the 1927 edition of Cundall and Anderson’s Jamaica Proverbs (1972:121-125).

RASH福德: ACKEE IN JAMAICA

(1) A white woman wid a black pickney [i.e., child].
(2) Me mader hah a whole Guinean ship full a people, an’ ebery one a dem come out wid red coat an’ black head.
(3) Me mader hah a hen an’ de chicken hah a black head an’ a red body.
(4) Me mader hah plenty savant, an’ dem all wear black cap.


(5) My mother had three children and each had a black h’eye.
(6) My father has three children and di three of dem ‘ead black. What is dat?

When we consider the riddles above, as well as the following five Eloise Rhone collected in 1996 from her students in Kingston, it is clear that the seed (most often representing the head or eyes) is an important focus of Jamaica’s ackee riddles.

(7) Me mother has three children all of their heads black.
(8) Mi father have some pickney, him send them out and three come back with them head black.

Rhone also collected the following three riddles in 1996 that had not been previously recorded:

(9) What has three eyes, yet can’t see
(10) A black man sit upon a white man’s head.
(11) You born green with eyes close and dead red with eyes open.

Word Games. Ackee also appears in an alphabet game which Beckwith (1929:83) described as follows:

Any number of players sits in a circle. As a letter falls to each player in the order of its succession in the alphabet, he must match the letter with an object with the same initial by reciting a verse from some familiar alphabet or inventing one impromptu in the same form. A forfeit is demanded as the penalty for failure.

Beckwith (1929:83-85) presented four examples of this game, and the first four lines of the only one in which “A” stands for ackee is as follows:

A signify ackee, quality fish,
B signify bammie [cassava], work proper with pear.
C signify callaloo [Amaranthus], eat very nice.
D stand for dumpling, if it ever tie you’ teet’.

Folktales. Jamaican folktales feature the ackee, and one of the most popular ackee story was early recorded by Jekyll (1966:100) and titled “Dry River.” Jekyll did not realize that the fruit he referred to in the story as “wacky”—which he identified as the guava, Psidium guava L.—was in fact the ackee. Dance (1985:105) titled this story “If you nuh gi mi one ackee,” and Tanna (1984:55–57) titled it “Norry an de ackee.” The tale, which promotes the life-preserving nature of generosity, is a dramatic musical performance. Here is Tanna’s version transcribed from a performance by Adina Henry:

There were once a lady that had two daughters and she has got a property across a dangerous riva, when
one day she send both a dem dey to get some h’acke. One of de girls was kind and freethreaded, but d’uda one was very mean and true being mean it’s not right for her even was to go across dat riva, for whenever anybody dat is mean go dere, dey generally lose dere life. And so it is—and so it was wit Nora.

On de day dat dey went for de ackees, and dey return, dey have to cross the riva—dey call it Dry Riva—and when dey reach by de riva, nobody’s dace but still dey hear de voice from de riva speak—
ing to dem and h’as dey enter de riva and middle de riva de voice says (sings): If you no give me one ackee Yo pass yah 3 times. Dry riva go come deng An wash yu way.

De sista dat is kin said to er [Miss Adina sings]: Gi im one. Nora, gi im one (3 times). Else dry riva go come deng An wash yu way.

Each time the “voice” asked the mean sister for ackee and was refused, the water rose higher until:

De wata catch her to her neck. De [kinn] sista said (singing faster, voice a plaintive, strangled sob—very weak at end): Gi im one. Nora, dry riva go come deng An wash yu way.

Jekyll’s version of the story has the character of an origin myth, for we learn at the end of the story that “[from that day people drowning’” (1966:101).

The ackee also finds a place in a category of humorous Jamaican tales called “Big Boy” stories. Big Boy is often portrayed as a student, and the stories (which are often sexually oriented) tell of the amusing situations he gets into with his classmates and especially with his “teacher.” Here is one of three versions recorded by Dance (1985:63–64) in 1978:

Well say it happen dat Big Boy massa was picking ackee. So well den, ci teacher and di oder students, you know, massa was playing game and so forth. So in picking ackee, Big Boy look up and di teacher was up in di ackee ree and, well, she have on a dress and ring, you know, and she was exposing herself. So Big Boy look up, astonish, and said, “Ah see a red, red adee!” So di teacher say, “Pick it and . . . .” “Awright [dramatizing Big Boy reaching under Teacher’s dress].” “AA-OGOOGOOO [Teacher’s reaction]!”

Traditional Beliefs. The recurring association of smiling with open ackees and well-being is evident in a widely known folk belief. Its most commonly expressed form was given by an informant who heard as a child that “if you laugh or smile under an ackee tree just when the crop begins to open, that tree will open fast.” Because the fruits are prized, and must be harvested individually before they spoil or are eaten by other animals, people must “search” to find ackees with fresh smiles. This search requirement is the likely basis for the belief that ackees can be encouraged to open by “smiling” or “laughing,” or as stated in some accounts, by “clapping,” “clapping and laughing,” or “counting.” Different interpretations of this belief were evident in a conversation between a retired physician and a young woman. The physician interpreted it to mean that during harvesting, “… if you keep looking you will see more open ackees. The laughing was not important.” The woman (and other informants) interpreted it to mean “the more you go and laugh, the more open trees. Go everyday, everyday you see more and more.” With this traditional view, “smiling” or “laughing” with ackees is an example of what Frazer (1911–1915) identifies as sympathetic magic, the principle that like produces like—a smiling face produces a smiling ackee, and both a smiling face and a smiling ackee mean safety, enjoyment, and overall well being. There are four other ackee-related beliefs that are not as widely known as the above. In an article on Jamaica’s plant lore, Brown (1967) reports that if you catch a falling leaf before it reaches the ground, “especially from an ackee tree . . . it will bring you good luck.”

The other three beliefs are taboos against eating ackees at specific times. The first was collected by students of the University of the West Indies (in the School of Nursing and of Agriculture) and published by Sadie Campbell (1974b:58), then Principal Scientific Officer of the Food and Nutrition Division of Jamaica’s Scientific Research Council:

If you have an ulcer (e.g., on the foot) do not eat rice, fish, ripe banana, ackee or avocado pear as they will give bad blood and cause the sore to worsen.

The second belief comes from an employee of the Ministry of Agriculture in the parish of Clarendon who heard “when the time is windy you shouldn’t eat ackee. The breeze,” she said, “force them to open and yuh can eat them together and the ackee is poisonous because it is forced open.” And the third comes from a Maroon woman who said when she was growing up in Moore Town in the parish of Portmore, people “never eat food around with ackee when it come on to Christmas time because it give you sore mouth.”

Popular Expressions. The ackee’s rise to prominence in Jamaican culture is evident in the way “ackee” has supplanted “salt” as a symbol of being “well-off,” and of “having the time of one’s life.” Human beings worldwide have long held salt in high esteem for its taste and dietary importance, and for its preservative and medicinal qualities. This, coupled with the fact that salted fish and meat were staples of plantation slavery, has had a big influence on the way Jamaicans traditionally conceive of edibles as either “salted” or “food” (also called “broad kind”). “Salted,” as Cassidy and Le Page note (1980:388), became a general term for meat or fish, whether salt or fresh, in contrast with ground provisions, fruit, or other food.” In Jamaican speech, a person well stocked with salted provisions was “in his salt.” This expression was extended to mean “having a good time.” Salt and salty became “salt” and “salty,” and “salty” meant “nice, attractive,” says Cassidy, and “is undoubtedly connected with the phrase to be in one’s salt” (1971:74).

Given current health concerns, and the popularization of the Rastafarian worldview with its influence on language and other aspects of Jamaican culture, “salt” is now used by some to describe what is bad. In its place, the delight of eating ackee is becoming the Jamaican yardstick for measuring the ultimate pleasure of any activity. Anyone performing an act with the same enjoyment that comes from eating ackee is described as “inna dem ackee.” Although this expression is not in Jamaica Talk (Cassidy 1971) or the Dictionary of Jamaican English (Cassidy and Le Page 1980), Browne (1984:12) records it in her prize-winning short story for children, and it is defined in The Original Dance Hall Dictionary (Williams 1993:30) as “feeling on top of the world, or feeling good” (Fig. 6). One informant said it is used as a compliment “when things are going well for someone.” Another
said it meant “being at ones best” in such things as giving a speech or sports competition. She recalls reading it in newspapers and hearing it on the radio in association with cricket.

The second current expression, which is familiar to many Jamaicans, is based on the association between acce and eyes. “People with prominent attractive eyes,” writes Rhone (1995), “are often said to have acce eyes.” This association is well established in traditional culture where it is evident in riddles and folk songs. It also finds expression in literature (e.g., Senior 1987:125) and in art. In November 1997, an art show in Kingston at what was then the Pegasus Hotel, featured a painting by Ray Jackson titled “Eyes.” It showed a line of six ripe accees with the open ends turned towards the viewer in a way that featured the seeds.

**Acker and Humor**

The association between acce and humor which is evident in such things as cartoons, riddles and word games, is also expressed in jokes and stories. In May 1995, I was told the following acce joke that my informant said “was going around Kingston.” A famous Jamaican musician on tour in the United States was asked how he liked hockey. “In Jamaica we don’t play hockey,” he responded, “we eat it.”

In November 1997, I overheard one boy telling another how he sang an acce while another, and the boy telling the story said he heard it on “entertainment news TV.” This joke is also mentioned in Joan Williams’ Back A Yard 4 (1995:36), the most recent addition to a series of books dealing with contemporary Jamaican humor, especially humor associated with “dancehall culture,” the current expression of the island’s popular music. “As a public service to its readers,” the book now updates you on the new words and phrases that are now tearing up the dance hall. So sit back and enjoy your hockey, for a Yard [i.e., in Jamaica], we don’t play hockey; we eat it.”

Williams’ humorous story in time in Back A Yard 4 (1995:38) offers another glimpse of the acce’s representation in contemporary Jamaican popular culture. Here we learn of some foolish “Yardies” who organized a “Time Observance Day” to make money from “smart Yardies by selling watches.” The effort failed. The organizers had offered free food; people came on time, ate, and were gone when the organizers arrived on Jamaica time (e.g., “if you have a date and arrive the next day, no big thing”). They failed to recognize that “a Yard, we have something called Jamaican Time which is even more sacred than acce” (my emphasis), and “the only time that Jamaica Time don’t run tings, is when free food is involved.”

**LITERATURE**

The acce’s conspicuousness in Jamaica’s settlement environment and way of life accounts for the many references to it in novels (e.g., Heinar 1956; Jones 1993), short stories (e.g., Browne 1984; Senior 1987:135; Williams 1995:38) and poetry (e.g., Bennett 1966:86-87; Maxwell-Will 1968; Bennett 1983:29). The poet and playwright, Barbara Zencraft (ca 1976:45), expresses the sentiment of her fellow Jamaicans when she writes:

*Musick*

Bates (1896:125-6) provides one of the earliest accounts of an acce song which tells the sad story of Sarah Miller, an African Jamaican woman “whose misfortune it was to be sup- planted in the affection of her lover by a younger rival. She became demented and continued to sing the song, which had been put together when her loss was recent.”

Oh! What do my buddy, Oy! [song twice] All da cox, me da cox.
My buddy won’t “peak a wot”;
Acker wear him green frock, O?
Acker ab him black eye, O?
De red frock burn, red frock burn,
Black eye will drop da groom:
It will drop from tree top,
Come down a groom like me, O:
Oh, what do me dubb, O?
Oh, what ma’nnta’ wi’ me dubb, O?
Buddy hev, buddy hev,
Po’ me gal, po’ me, O.

2001

RASHFORD: ACKEE IN JAMAICA

Do wha’ me do, buddy hev;
Buddy won’t “peak to me, O!”
Da since he go leevard, come back,
Buddy won’t “peak to me, O!”

In 1925, Roberts published an acce song with several names that seems to have been more widely known then, than it is today. Here is one of the six versions he recorded titled “Ackee”:

Nite somba gal? She cyan cook none at a!
Pretty somba gal, she cyan cook none at a!
Sen’ her back to her mudder? Sen’ her back to her mudder
Tek aloe boil song, she tek ’notta (Bissa orellana L.)
Color it
Gal you wan’ fe come kill me?

The small inland town of Linstead, St. Catherine, has been immortalized by the folksong “Linstead Market” which all Jamaicans know. This is not only one of Jamaica’s most popular folk songs, but also its most well-known acce song (White and Wright 1969:3; Silbey 1978:95; Morris 1988:50). Jekyll (1966) recorded it in 1905, and it is routinely included in works on Jamaica’s folk music. Adams (1971b:30) uses its opening words to title the chapter of his book that deals with the acce. The song was performed by a woman vendor in Linstead Market who cannot sell her acce on a Saturday night, usually one of the most profitable nights of the week:

Carry me acce go a Linstead market
Not a quality [a penny and half-penny] wat sell [repeat].
[Refrain] Lawd was a night, not a bite
Wat a Saturday night [twice].
Evrybody come feel up, feel up,
Not a quality wat sell [repeat and then the refrain].
Tek me sell 1 louder acce, acce
Rast an pretty dem tan.
Lady buy ju Sunday Mawning bruikas,
Rice an acce nyan grant [Lewin 1975:14-15].

That the acckes did not sell could have resulted from a market glut, or from the woman’s location or disposition. But the fact that many people felt the fruits without buying suggest they were in less than ideal condition. This popular folk song in the mento tradition is probably the one Morton had in mind when she wrote incredulously that the acce “is featured in a calypso despite the health hazards associated with it” (1987:270). Clearly people who know how to “feel up” acce are people who know how to eat them safely.

A revealing reference to acce occurs in “Me Coffee,” another popular Jamaican folk song, which is usually performed in an amusing way (Jamaica Agricultural Society ca 1960). In the last verse and the chorus, the singer describes herself, and the importance of coffee in her life, in the following way:

I is an ole ’oman now
And does often punch hard,
But I has seen me good days,
And I mus’ satisfy,
I can still hold togechter
And still praise de Lord—
If I only gets me coffee in de marrin’.
[CHORUS] Me coffee, me coffee, me coffee, me coffee.
Me bowl of boiling coffee in de marrin’,
I care for none of these [i.e., “chocolate,” “tea,” “sugar and water” or “lemonade”], de only thing for me,
Is me bowl of boiling coffee in de marrin’.

Now when Jamaicans wish to emphasize how important a thing is, or how much it is enjoyed, they do so by placing it below, along with, or above the acce. One song in the third verse just how much the “ole’ woman” really loves coffee by her reference to acce:

Sometimes I has [me coffee] . . . gran’
Wid me acce and salt fish,
And me yeller heart breadfruit,
Ripe pear an’ coconut oil.

But wha’ me min’ does gi’ me for
More better dan de rest
Is coffee wid a gill bread in de marrin’.

Expressing the value of things by comparing them to the acce is evident in the story of Nora and the acce—the younger sister, unlike Nora, chooses life over the acce. In the story “Time Observance Day” (Williams 1995:38), we learned that the only thing “more sacred than acce” is “Jamaica Time,” and that the only thing that overruled Jamaica time was “free food.” And it is also evident in a popular folk song called “Yellow Yam.” As with the old woman and coffee, those who wish to eat yellow acce in a “gran’” style eat it with acce and saltfish:

When me rest de yellow yam
And me slice it into two
How nice it will be
Wid de ackee and de saltfish
And de white flour dumpling
And de coconut oil
What a glorious day
When me roast de yellow yam

Today, the ackee also appears in irreverent nonsense songs where new words have been added to familiar tunes. Written versions of the following three songs were given to Dance in 1978 by Kingston teachers (Dance 1985:180-183). The first is composed to the tune of “Blessed Assurance,” which Dance says “is sung very solemnly.” The second song is set to “We Three Kings,” and the third to “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name.”"25

“Blessed Assurance”
Blessed assurance, damping is mine,
Ackee and salt fish with coconut oil,
When Mama cook it, it’s sweeter than wine,
When Mama cook it with coconut oil.

“We Three Kings”
Oh, ackee and salt fish, bulla and pear,
Let us make a sacrifice,
One on a bicycle, two on a tricycle,
Three on a donkey cart.

“All Hail the Power”
All hail the power of rice and peas,
Let dumpling prostrate fall,
Bring forth the royal ackee and fish,
And crown them, crown them, crown them,
Crown them with coconut oil.

In a 1990 interview with Muriel Wyman at the Jamaican Institute of Folk Culture, she recited a song called “ackee moddah-in-law” which she described as a lullaby for nursing children:

You no know se ackee poison
Ackee moddah-in-law
Ackee sweet but it poison
Buti you ackee and drink the water it poison

Ackee also appears in familiar songs like “Jamaica Farewell,” and in contemporary reggae and dancehall music.

VISUAL ARTS AND RELIGION

Ackee is present in Jamaica’s visual arts in works ranging from inexpensive tourist curios to the best of the island’s internationally recognized art tradition which encompasses a wide variety of styles. In some cases, the ackee is the focus of attention as with Ray Jackson’s “Eyes,” Paul Clayton’s “A Slice of Jamaica,” and Phillip Henry’s “The Big Ackee.” In many cases, however, it is only a part of the presentation of familiar Jamaican scenes. Two common themes are roadside and market vendors with the island’s harvest heaped about them, and the typical Jamaican house surrounded by ackee and other fruit trees.26

The paintings of the Rastafarian Everald Brown are strikingly different. “No artist,” according to David Boxer (Jamaica’s well known painter, art historian and Director of the National Gallery of Jamaica), “so effectively conveys the spirit of the rich folk culture of Jamaica than doesEverald Brown.” He is one of the foremost representatives of what Jamaican scholars now identify as the island’s “intuitive” tradition—largely self-taught artists whose paintings and other works are manifestations of their visionary experiences.

Although Brown includes a variety of plants and animals in his work, Poupeye-Rummelcare (1985:11) notes that “[m]ost of the images used are those of animals, plants, and objects of daily experience.” This characterizes the work of many of Jamaica’s folk artists, who draw upon the rich tradition of ancestor worship and other indigenous beliefs.

In the past, the ackee and other fruits were used as offerings to the spirits of ancestors and other deities. In recent years, however, the ackee has been used in a different way—by Jamaican artists as a symbol of the island’s cultural heritage. In his painting “The Offering,” Brown uses the ackee as a symbol of the island’s rich agricultural heritage, as well as a symbol of the island’s cultural identity.

Fig. 7. Everald Brown’s painting titled “Spiritualism.”

OPPORTUNISTIC USES

A full account of the uses of the ackee in Jamaica would include the tree’s practical value as a source of shade, timber, firewood and charcoal. Some, however, are not generally speaking, reasons for planting or transplanting the tree, or for “saving” wild seedlings, and they usually involve trees that are unwanted, diseased or dead.

In the public opinion section of the April 27, 1957, Daily Gleaner, an anonymous author suggested that the “hard wood of the mature tree” could be used for furniture, but that “this would hardly be the most economic use of a tree which in one year’s crop could produce more in cash from the fruits than the timber could.” Nevertheless, the 1988 Bulletin of the Botanical Department of Jamaica listed the tree as one of the “timber” and “shade” trees offered for sale, and Harris included the tree in his article “The Timbers of Jamaica,” noting that its wood “is light and durable and suitable for all purposes except in exposed situations” (1990:12-13).

The beauty of the ackee tree—its colorful fruit and glossy leaves—is for Jamaicans the tree’s most important opportunistic inspirational value, and it is frequently mentioned in publications (Lunan 1814:9; Beckwith 1929-44; Sturrock 1940:111; Dahlgren 1947:15; Hawkes 1968b; Adams 1971b:32). Other opportunistic inspirational uses of minor significance include a Portland informant who said that during her school days, gum from the tree was sometimes used for glue, and that young fruits dislodged during harvesting were used “to play ball.”
CONCLUSION

Given the ackee's importance in the Jamaican diet, its association with poisoning survives the extraordinary attention it has received over the past hundred years. Yet, though Jamaicans have always known of its deadly potential, it is clear that they have increasingly come to associate their "beloved ackee" (Nettleford 1990:326)—Jamaica's colorful tree of life—"with pleasure, overall well being and national identity. The fruit with its beautiful eyes smiles and laughes, and Jamaicans return the compliment, for to be Jamaican is to know how to enjoy ackee safety by distinguishing between those that smile and those that do not smile—those that do not smile will kill.

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RASHFORD: ACKEE IN JAMAICA


1. Examples of this literature include Arnold (1944), Hill (1952), Chambers (1953), Williams (1954), Hassall and Reyne (1955), Plumb (1963), Keen (1975), Bressler (1976), Thomas and Krieger (1976), Tanaka (1979), Chase, Landen and Soliman (1982), and Dowson et al. (1992).

2. Many Jamaican identified ackee and saltfish when asked to name the national dish, and this idea is common in publications (e.g., Hazelton 1976; Harris 1980:4). Broughton credits Chillingworth and other merchants who came to Jamaica, but with introducing it to the garden of Hinton East, Lewis (1961). Amsden (1981) and Adams (1979:23) concur. Unfortunately, their accounts are as vague as Broughton’s, and it seems to have been a feature of the slave society. Ackee has also been referred to as a new marriage... Two years later, in an article in the Daily Gleaner newspaper titled “Saltfish to be sold” (November 11, 1999), Margaret Pows, a staff reporter wrote: “The price of saltfish is to be increased by 30 per cent as of next week. This means that consumers will have to pay as much as $166 for a pound of salt fish (approximately 35 Jamaican dollars equals 1 U.S.), a product which now sells for between $100 and $125 a pound, according to importers.”

12. Chase, Landen and Soliman (1980:125) and Brown et al. (1992:174) have followed her in this regard. I have not been able to confirm this, and “yawning” does not appear in Jamaica Talk (Cassidy 1973), or in the Dictionary of Jamaican English (Cassidy and Le Page 1980). The association that is clearly evident in the inspirational life of Jamaicans is between smiling, open ackees and well being.

23. “Buddy” is a term of endearment. I have not been able to confirm this as a proven fragment. It does not appear in published accounts of Jamaican proverbs, in dictionaries, or in other works on the language and oral traditions of Jamaicans.

18. The culinary arts competition is an important part of an annual celebration of Jamaican culture called “Festival.” It was originally limited to an amateur division, but in recognition of the importance of tourism in the national economy, it was expanded in 1965 to include a professional division open to individuals, hotels, guesthouses and restaurants.

22. For example, in 1989, the gift shop of the Wyndham Hotel, Trelawny, had four kinds of doughnuts made by Mrs. Merinda Reeden of St. Catherine. They show the ackee as it appears in urban and rural markets and along the island’s thoroughfares. One was a market basket of the ackee and other familiar fruits. The others were market vendors with a similar basket which one had on her head, one had resting on her waist, and one (who was seated) had set before her.

27. Earl Brown has received both local and international acclaim, his work is now part of the permanent collection of Jamaica’s National Gallery, and the Museum of Modern Art of Latin America (Washington), and he is mentioned in several major publications on “intuitive” art (Powepye-Ramelleire 1986).