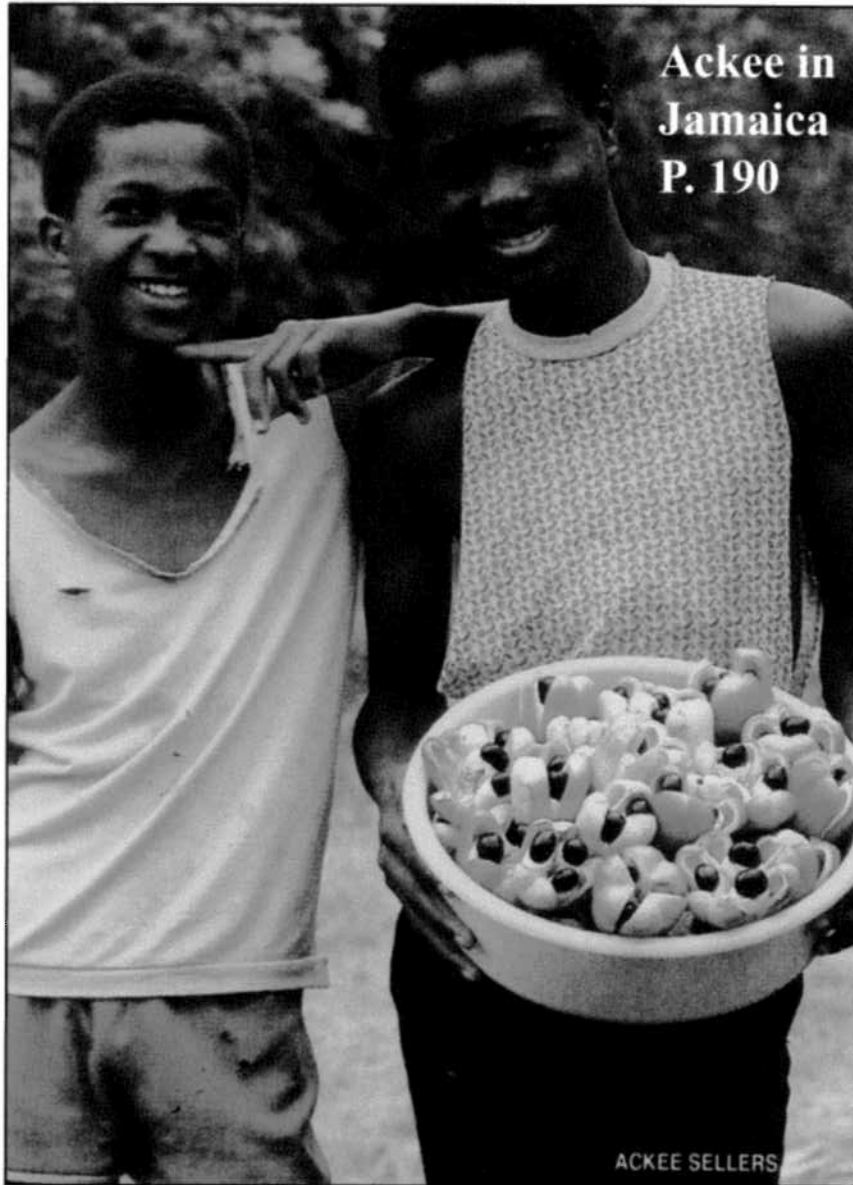


Economic Botany

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April–June 2001

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



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 tropical West Africa, beloved by Jamaicans, even 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.’

SPECIAL REPORT

**THOSE THAT DO NOT SMILE WILL KILL ME:
THE ETHNOBOTANY OF THE ACKEE IN JAMAICA**

“Me fader send me to pick out a wife; tell me to tek only those that smile, fe those that do not smile wi’ kill me.”

(Beckwith 1929:44)

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 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” (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).

Little attention has been given to the ackee’s overall cultural importance in Jamaica. On the contrary, Jamaica’s most celebrated fruit has, over the past hundred years, become more widely known in the scientific literature for its association with poisoning than for its desirability as an edible fruit (Morton 1987:269).¹ Yet the fruit is one of two main ingredients in “ackee and saltfish,” a prized staple commonly identified as the national dish.² It is, no doubt, the love of this dish that accounts for the ackee’s selection as Jamaica’s official national fruit (Sealy 1982:8; Nettleford 1996). Images of the fruit, tree or dish appear on stamps and coins, and on a variety of other objects found in homes, stores, hotel gift shops, craft markets and roadside stalls.³

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 kilometers 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, overlooking 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).⁴ 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.⁵ Green at first, they become various shades of red or yellow as they mature, and are often red with flushes of yellow, or yellow with flushes 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



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.

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Covers

Front: Ackee servers. Original photograph by Donovan McGowan; printed by Platinum Postcards, Mandeville, Jamaica.

Back: *The Offering* by Jonna Brasch. Oil on canvas, 1996. From a greeting card produced for the Jamaican S.P.C.A. by Art Professionals Limited, Kingston. Used with permission of the artist.

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The ackee fruit is held in reverence in Jamaica as attested by the riddle and legend on the front cover of this issue.

You made sure to take the time to read that the ackee will kill me. The ethnobotany of the ackee in Jamaica.



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Fig. 1. A ripe or "smiling" ackee.

fleshy yellow aril some 4 mm in length, oblong in shape, glossy in appearance, oily to the touch, and like marrow when cooked.⁶ The cooked aril has a mild taste of its own that is often described as delicate or bland.⁷

Although the ackee is a highly variable species (Stair and Sidrak 1992:11), Jamaicans tra-

ditionally 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



Fig. 2. A billboard in Ocho Rios showing the use of ackee as a symbol of Kingston and Montego Bay.

flies and fungi (Naylor 1974:106; Royes and Baccus 1988:181-2).

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*, but East died in 1792 and the task fell to Dr. Broughton, an individual described by Edwards (1793:189) as "a very eminent and learned physician and botanist."

In *Hortus Eastensis*, Broughton records the name ackee, identifies the tree as new to science, describes it in Latin, and credits Dr. Thomas Clarke with giving it to East in 1778. In a footnote he offers this ambiguous account of its introduction: "This plant was brought . . . in a Slave Ship from the coast of Africa, and now grows very luxuriant, producing every year large quantities of fruit; several gentlemen are encouraging the propagation of it."⁸ By 1814, a mere 36 years after its introduction into East's garden, and 21 years after Edwards published Broughton's *Hortus Eastensis*, Lunan (1814, p. 9) reported that the ackee, "having thriven well, has been generally propagated, and succeeds in most parts of the island." It "survives best in the lowlands," continued Lunan, noting that in "the mountains it seldom bears fruit, and the north winds are extremely injurious to it." In

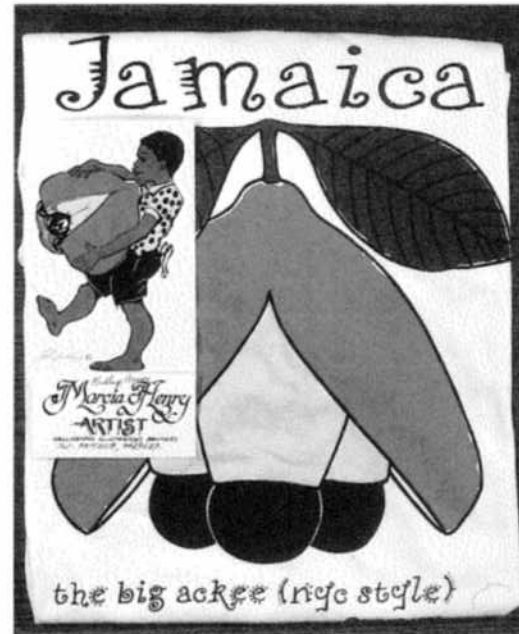


Fig. 3. Illustrations of the "big ackee" theme on a tee-shirt, and on a postcard from a painting by Phillip Henry (upper left hand corner).

1851, Bigelow identified the ackee as "[a]mong those fruits which grow with greatest abundance and perfection" (1851:65), and shortly thereafter, Grisebach (1859:125) described it as "naturalized in Jamaica."⁹

Ackee has become a major food crop only in Jamaica (Adams 1971a:15, 1972:441). This is so despite frequent claims that in the "Caribbean" it is a "prized food" (Kingsbury 1988) or a "popular dish" (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 1993: 187); or claims that in the "West Indies" it is a "great delicacy" (Irvine 1930:56), "in great demand" (Sturrock 1940:111), or is "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 1968:246).¹⁰ 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 Butcher 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).¹¹ Ackees that are not picked soon after opening spoil before falling, or are eaten by birds or other animals.¹² 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).¹³

Table 1 compares the composition of ackee and avocado which are both identified as "vegetable marrow" in the literature.

Raw Fruits. Although most informants had only heard of eating raw ackee, there were some who ate it, and others who saw or knew someone who did.¹⁴ It is clearly misleading then to state without qualification that raw ackee "is" (or "is said to be") poisonous (e.g., Standley 1968:246; Mabberley 1987:71), or that "no one will eat raw ackee" in Jamaica (Wolfe 1970: 58). It is equally misleading for Sturrock (1940: 111) to say, as does Storer (1958:47) and Terra (1966:30), that ackee "is good to eat when fresh, either raw or cooked," or for Morton (1981:486) to say that it is "much eaten raw" in Jamaica. Jamaicans primarily eat ackee as a cooked fruit-vegetable. Those who ate uncooked ackees did so only as an infrequent opportunistic snack. I occasionally ate raw ackee as a child, but only during harvesting, and never more than two or three arils at a time. Jamaicans do not regard raw ackee as "food"—it cannot provide a "belly full" (as Jamaicans express it). Raw ackee is never served as part of a meal, even on the most

TABLE 1. COMPOSITION OF FOODS IN EDIBLE PORTION OF ONE POUND, AS PURCHASED. CARIBBEAN FOOD AND NUTRITION INSTITUTE (1974:24).

Item	Food and description	Water g	Energy kcal.	Protein g	Fat g	Carbo- hydrate (total) g	Fibre g	Calcium mg	Iron mg	Vit. A R.E.**	Thi- mine mg	Ribo- flavin mg	Niacin mg	Vit. C mg	Refuse as purchased %
0549	Ackee														
	(<i>Blighia sapida</i>)	71.5	810	18.9	78.3	24.8	1.35	166.5	7.65	839	0.32	0.77	7.2	351	72-skin & seeds
0551	Avocado pear (<i>Persea americana</i>)	75.0	500	5.6	49.4	19.7	(6.2)	40	2.2	90	0.22	0.74	4.6	37	32

** R.E. = Retinol equivalents.

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, and as a snack at any time, ackee and saltfish is often identified as Jamaica's "favorite" or "national" breakfast dish (Harris 1912:181; Harris 1991:49). It is a Saturday and Sunday morning treat. This is clearly evident in "Linstead Market," one of the island's most popular folksongs. Ackee and saltfish is also served on festive occasions. "New Year's Day," writes Hayward (1996:10), "starts with a breakfast of saltfish and ackee."

"Dressing" and "frying" 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.¹⁵ 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, onion, scallion, tomato, 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.



Fig. 4. Evidence of the high price of saltfish in a Gleaner newspaper cartoon by Leandro (14 August 1989).

Then the saltfish and parboiled ackees 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 substitutes 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, lob-

ster, and shrimps. Hayward (1996:10) suggests smoked salmon. While some informants added susumber (*Solanum torvum* Sw.) to their ackee and saltfish, Beckwith (1929:141) identified susumber as a "substitute" for saltfish.

Fried Ackee. Plain fried ackee has never been popular in Jamaica, despite reports of this dish 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 (1988), for example, states that "[c]ooking in water reduces the [ackee's] toxicity (if the water is discarded), but many prefer ackee 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 (1814:9) 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,¹⁶ 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 (Ebanks 1981; Osborne 1992).

Boiled Ackee. Although Sullivan (1908:70) includes boiled "ackees 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?"¹⁷ This fragment of a Jamaican folk song, which Hill (1952:255) erroneously identified as a Jamaican proverb, sug-

gests 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 ever since (Sullivan 1908:5; Harris 1912:181; Fawcett and Rendle 1926:57; Williams 1954:22; Abrahams 1957:203; Seaforth 1962:53; Ortiz 1973:36; Benghiat 1985:43; Osborne 1992:40).

Nevertheless, ackee soup is not as common as Kaplan et al. suggests. Although Ortiz (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 ackees 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 Louis Bailey. It is clear that ackee soup does not rank with known Jamaican favorites like pepper pot, fish tea, mannish water, beef soup, red peas soup, and pumpkin soup. 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 starches consumed in Jamaica, and plain and mixed rice dishes are very popular. Topping the list of mixed rice dishes is "rice and peas," a favorite for Sunday dinner 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 is a 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 ackees 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 (1998: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."¹⁸ 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; Benghiat 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 Le Page 1980:388) and in many Caribbean Cookbooks (e.g., Spence 1981:13; Benghiat 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 mackerel, or with shad or herring, but other ingredients include saltfish, fresh fish, crab, shrimp, "jangga" (the river prawn *Macrobrachium jamaicensis*), lobster, or vegetables (Spence 1981:1; Grant 1988:101). Several informants said rundown "can mek with any thing," but only a Portlander 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.



Fig. 5. A cartoon by Leon Hinds illustrating the changing cultural significance of ackee and saltfish in the national diet (Williams 1991:47).

Specialty Dishes. Jamaica's traditional cooking is fast becoming an internationally recognized cuisine, and the lowly ackee and saltfish from the days of forced labor now tops the list of the island's favorite dishes. This change is noted by Egan (1974:62), and comically illustrated in Fig. 5 by the editorial cartoonist Leon Hinds (Williams 1991:47). It is also evident in the increasing variety of ackee dishes, and the wider social context in which they are served. Ackee and saltfish, for example, is now on the menu of hotels, restaurants and cafeterias, and some hotels offer ackee quiche (Zach 1988:275). In Kingston, ackee quiche is sold at Sovereign Center shopping mall in Liguanea, and at the plaza in Half Way Tree. Bigga's in Papine serves ackee loaf (which is ackee and saltfish in a bread-like semicircular pastry shell). Nowhere is the changing status of ackee in Jamaica's culinary heritage more evident, however, than in cookbooks.

Ackee and saltfish is now a filling for patties (Ortiz 1973:15; Goldman 1992:43) and pies (Hawkes 1968a:16; Meeks 1970:19; Benghiat 1985:77; DeWitt, Wilan and Stock 1996:54-55). Recipes for ackee souffle 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 cho-cho (Walsh and McCarthy 1995), "turned cornmeal with ackee and saltfish" (National Children's Home 1995:15), ackee au gratin (Hawkes 1968a:16), ackee croquettes (Roberts 1987:32), ackee salad (Miller and Henry 1989:37), and stewed ackees (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 arils with the seeds still attached were being sold in plastic bags at Hi-Lo supermarket in Liguanea. Over the past eight years, Lenn Happ Supermarket in Twin Gates Plaza, has also been selling similarly packaged ackees. Two cashiers at Lenn Happ said "it was mostly foreigners" who bought it. "Clean ackee" refers to arils 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 ackees when 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, Cayman 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 way 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, there is "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 "teas," 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; Robertson 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 1974a:60; Ayensu 1981:167; Morton 1981:485; Armstrong 1990:343).

In part two of their four-part study, Asprey and Thornton reported that "[i]n some parts of Jamaica ackee leaves are boiled to make a 'rub' for pains" (1954:21). Informants were not familiar with this. Many knew, however, that the "juice" from young fruits was used for a rub, and three had witnessed this. One person said it was used to treat "diseased 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

a "tea" made with ackee leaves was used for colds and they cited Wehmer (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 pyorrhoea" (1955b: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).¹⁹ She records the use of ackee tea 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 Baths. Because Jamaicans believe ackee leaves have medicinal value, they are also used in the preparation of bush 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 Le 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; Benghiat 1985).

Soap. 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, Lunan mentions this use of the ackee, noting in his discussion of the fruit that the "husk lathers and washes like soap" (1814, Addition to 1:9). 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-rice I-ons, told the anthropologist Homiak (1995:148) that in his community, they would wash with "ciracee [*Momordica char-*

antia L.] or soap bush or sometime . . . ackee skin." The shortage of soap and the substitution of "ackee-skin and ashes" is humorously expressed in the poetry of Louise Bennett, one of Jamaica's most celebrated writers and performers (Bennett 1966:86-87).

The only mention of ackee leaves used for washing is that of Barbara Gloudon, the well-known Jamaican journalist, playwright and talk-show host. Commenting on the frequent shortages of soap in her 1979 newspaper column, she jokingly tells "of a friend out looking fe ackee leaf and gully bean leaf [*Solanum torvum* Sw.] and all them kind of leaf which can make suds" (1991:167).

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 predate 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 machete (*Erythrina poeppigiana* (Walp.) O. F. Cook), and especially the grow stake (*Gliricidia sepium* (jacq.) Kunth ex Griseb.).

INSPIRATIONAL USES

ORAL TRADITIONS

The ackee is featured in the music, literature, visual arts and oral traditions of Jamaicans, and the oral traditions in which it appears include proverbs, riddles, word-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):

- (1) A white woman wid a black pickney [i.e., child].
- (2) Me fader hab a whole Guinea ship full a people, an' ebery one a dem come out wid red coat an' black head.
- (3) Me fader had a hen an' each time him hatch an egg, de chicken hab a black head an' a red body.
- (4) Me fader hab plenty sarvant, an' dem all wear black cap.

Tanna (1984:48) recorded the fifth riddle in Kingston in 1973, and Dance (1985:147) recorded the sixth in Kingston in 1978.

- (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 which 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, qualify fish,
 B signify bammie [cassava], work proper with pear,
 C signify callalue [*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 guajava* L.—was in fact the ackee.²⁰ Dance (1985:105) titled this story "If you nuh gi mi one ackee," and Tanna (1984:35-37) titled it "Nora 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:²¹

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 go dere to get some h'ackee. One of de girls were kind and freehanded, but d'uda one was very mean and tru being mean it's not right for her even was to go across dat riva, for wheneva 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 h'ackees, and dey return, dey have to cross the riva—dey call it Dry Riva—and when dey reach by de riva, nobody's dere but still dey hear de voice from de riva speaking to dem and h'as dey enter de riva and middle de riva de voice says [sings]: If yu no give me one ackee Yu na pass yah (3 times). Dry riva da go come dung An wash yu way.

De sista dat was kinhearted give to -drop one of de h'ackee in the riva—and d'uda sista wouldn' give h'it. De sista dat was kin said to er [Miss Adina sings]: Gi im one, Nora, gi im one (3 times). Else dry riva da go come dung 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 [[kind]] sista said [singing faster, voice a plaintive, strangled sob—very weak at end]: Gi im one, Nora . . . Dry riva da go come dung 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 "[f]rom 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 that Big Boy mussi was picking ackee. So well den, di teacher and di oder students, you know, mussi was playing game and so forth. So in picking ackee, Big Boy look up and di teacher was up in di ackee tree and, well, she have on a dress and ting, you know, and she was exposing herself. So Big Boy look up, astonish, and [said], "Ah see a red, red ackee!" So di teacher say, "Pick it and . . ." "Awright [dramatizing Big Boy reaching under Teacher's dress]." "AA-OOOOOO [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, they will open faster."²² 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 ackee open. 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 by knocking them together, and the ackee is poisonous because it is forced



Fig. 6. A cartoon by Shawn Grant illustrating the use of the expression "inna yu ackee" (Williams 1993:30). "Dawta" in this context means girlfriend.

open." And the third comes from a Maroon woman who said when she was growing up in Moore Town in the parish of Portland, people "never fool 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 "saalting" or "food" (also called "bread-kind"). "Saalting," 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 "saal" and "saaly," and "saaly" meant "nice, attractive," says Cassidy, and "is undoubtedly connected with the phrase to be in one's salt" (1971:169).

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 ackee seeds and eyes. "People with prominent attractive eyes," writes Rhone (1995), "are often said to have ackee eyes." This association is well established in traditional culture where it is evident in riddles and folksongs. It also finds expression in literature (e.g., Senior 1987:135) and 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 ackees with the open ends turned towards the viewer in a way that featured the seeds.

Ackee and Humor. The association between ackee 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 ackee 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, I overheard one boy telling it to another, and the boy telling the story said he heard it on "entertainment news TV." This joke is also mentioned in Joan Williams's *Back A Yard 4* (1995:46), the most recent addition to a series of small books dealing with contemporary Jamaican humor, especially humor associated with "dancehall culture," the current expression of the island's popular music. "So as a public service," *Back A Yard 4* tells its reader, "we will now update you on the new words and phrases that are now tearing up the *dance hall*. So sit back and relax and enjoy you hockey, for a *Yard* [i.e., in Jamaica], we don't play *hockey*, we eat it."

Williams' humorous story on time in *Back A Yard 4* (1995:38) offers another glimpse of the ackee'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 ting"). They

failed to recognize that "*a Yard, we have something called Jamaica Time which is even more sacred than ackee*" (my emphasis), and "the only time that Jamaica Time don't run tings, is when free food is involved."

LITERATURE

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

Mi luv mi Ackee & codfish
It name Jamaica's National Dish
Mi juss back de fish wid lickle ile
An fry up eberyting eena fi mi style.
Juss mix it wid a lickle cawmeal dumpling
An add a couple slices a peel pumpkin
Di yellow yam is juss as good
Fi help full di pot wid more food.
Sometime mi can't even wait fi di bickle bwile
Mi juss teck pieca a bread an lickle ile
An scrape out all de Ackee and Codfish
An sey to di food: "Bwile if yu wish!"
Cause seh Ackee an Codfish
Is wan of di sweetist Dish!

MUSIC

Bates (1896:125-6) provides one of the earliest accounts of an ackee song which tells the sad story of Sarah Miller, an African Jamaican woman "whose misfortune it was to be supplanted 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."²³

Oh! What do my buddy, O! [sung twice]
All da coax, me da coax,
My buddy won' 'peak a wor';
Ackee wear him green frock, O!
Ackee hab him black eye, O!
De red frock burn, red frock burn,
Black eye will drop da groun';
It will drop from tree top,
Come down a groun' like me, O!
Oh, what do me dubby, O?
Oh, wha's matta' wi' me dubby, O!
Buddy bex', buddy bex'.
Po' me gal, po' me, O!

Do wha' me do, buddy bex',
Buddy won' 'peak to me, O!
Da since he go to leewar', come back,
Buddy won' 'peak to me, O!

In 1925, Roberts published an ackee 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":

Nice somba gal! She cyan cook none at a'!
Pretty somba gal, she cayn cook none at a'
Sen' her back to her mudder! Sen' her back to her mudder
Tek akee boil soup, she tek 'notta (*Bixa orellana* L.)
Color it
Gal you wan' fe come kill me?²⁴

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 ackee song (White and Wright 1969:93; Sibley 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 ackee. The song tells of a woman vendor in Linstead Market who cannot sell her ackee on a Saturday night, usually one of the most profitable nights of the week:

Carry me ackee go a Linstead market
Not a quatty [a penny and half-penny] wut sell [repeat].
[Refrain] Lawd wat a night, not a bite
Wat a Satiday night [twice].
Ev'rybody come feel up, feel up,
Not a quatty wut sell [repeat and then the refrain].
Tek me call i' louder ackee, ackee,
Red an pretty dem tan.
Lady buy yu Sunday Mawning brukfas',
Rice an ackee nyam gran' (Lewin 1975:14-15).

That the ackees 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 ackee "is featured in a calypso despite the health hazards associated with it" (1987:270). Clearly people who know

how to "feel up" ackee are people who know how to eat them safely.

A revealing reference to ackee 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 'ooman now
And does often punish hard,
But I has seen me good days,
And I mus' satisfy,
I can still hold togedder
And still praise de Lard -
If I only gets me coffee in de marnin'.
[CHORUS] Me coffee, me coffee, me coffee, me coffee,
Me bowl of boiling coffee in de mornin',
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 mornin'.

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 ackee. We learn in the third verse just how much the "ole 'ooman" really loves coffee by her reference to ackee:

Sometimes I has [me coffee] . . . gran'
Wid me ackee and salt fish,
And me yellor 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 marnin'.

Expressing the value of things by comparing them to the ackee is evident in the story of Nora and the ackee—the younger sister, unlike Nora, chooses life over the ackee. In the story "Time Observance Day" (Williams 1995:38), we learned that the only thing "more sacred than ackee" 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 yam in a "gran'" style eat it with ackee and saltfish:

When me roast de yellow yam
And me slice it inna 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, dumpling 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 dumplin’ 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 Whynn at the Jamaican Institute of Folk Culture, she recited a song called “ackee modda-in-law” which she described as a lullaby for nursing children:

You no know se ackee poison
Ackee modda-in-law
Ackee sweet but it poison
Boil 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 does Everald Brown.”²⁷ 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-Rammelaere (1988:11) notes that “[o]ne of the most commonly used symbols . . . is the ackee, because of its colours and name (ackee—‘a key’ to wisdom) symbolic of Rastafarianism.” The ackee’s colors are not only significant in oral traditions, they have been of increasing political importance in the development of Jamaican culture. Commenting on Jamaican art, especially the “Intuitive School,” Nettleford (1996:21) notes that ackee’s “aesthetic appeal . . . with its red pods, black seeds and golden fruit has long attracted the attention of painters . . . some of whom have identified the mix of colours as symbolic of liberation and freedom.” At its 1920 Convention, the Garvey Movement’s United Negro Improvement Association adopted red, black and green as the official colors of African people: red for the blood of freedom’s martyrs, black for Africans “at home and abroad,” and green for fertile lands the assurance of victory over oppression. With the development of the Rastafarian tradition, however, the emphasis is now on the red, gold and green of the Ethiopian flag: red for blood, gold for the life-giving sun, and green for the earth. These colors now appear on jewelry, clothing, buildings, and a wide variety of other things. The ackee also embraces the national colors of black, green and gold, whose present interpretation is “hardship there are, but the land is green and the sun shineth” (Nettleford 1996:13). During world cup soccer, in addition to various combinations of the na-



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

tional colors, many Jamaicans now wear gold tee-shirts in support of the national team.

In Everald Brown’s paintings, individuals wear ackee crowns, and in “Spiritualism” (1979), one of his best known works, the island’s settlement vegetation is presented in what seems like the Garden of Eden. In the midst of the garden are two trees of great inspirational importance to Jamaicans: the cotton tree for its association with traditional religion (Rashford 1989), and the ackee, Jamaica’s tree of life (Fig. 7).

The ackee crown is also seen on “Rasta Head” carvings commonly sold in the tourist trade, and is beautifully presented in the 1996 “mother-and-child” painting by Jonna Brasch titled “The Offering” (see back cover). This is now a very popular card sold in aid of Jamaica Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

OPPORTUNISTIC USES

A full account of the ackee in Jamaica must distinguish routine uses from opportunistic uses which include the tree’s practical value as a source of shade, timber, firewood and charcoal. These are opportunistic uses because they 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 1888 *Bulletin of the Botanical Department of Jamaica* listed ackee as one of the “timber” and “shade” trees offered for sale, and Harris included the ackee in his article “The Timbers of Jamaica,” noting that its wood “is light and durable and suitable for all purposes except in exposed situations” (1909:12–13).

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 deserves 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 1989:326)—Jamaica's colorful tree of life—with pleasure, overall well being and national identity. The fruit with its beautiful eyes smiles and laughs, and Jamaicans return the compliment, for to be Jamaican is to know how to enjoy ackee safely by distinguishing between those that smile and those that do not smile—those that do not smile will kill.

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ENDNOTES

1. Examples of this literature include Arnold (1944), Hill (1952), Chambers (1953), Williams (1954), Has-sall and Reyle (1955), Plimmer and Seaforth (1963), Kean (1975), Bressler (1976), Thomas and Krieger (1976), Tanaka (1979), Chase, Landen and Soliman (1990), and Brown et al. (1992).

2. Many Jamaicans identified ackee and saltfish when asked to name the national dish, and this idea is common in publications (e.g., Hazelton 1976; Harris 1988:54; Elbert and Elbert 1991:228). Wilson, Kerr and Newell (1993:9) say, for example, that at Jamaica's independence, ackee and saltfish were "declared the national dish." Others refer to it as "almost" the national dish (Lee 1985:35; Willinsky 1990:78), and as "one of Jamaica's national dishes" (Simon and Howe 1970:12; Cusick 1995:42). Jamaica has no official national dish, however, and ackee and saltfish is only widely regarded and reported as such (see Nettleford 1996).

3. These include postcards, greeting cards, photographic art, book covers, calendars, clothing, trinket boxes, hair pins, brooches, earrings, necklaces, tie pins, key rings, telephone cards, straw handbags, stickers, book markers, pencils, erasers, rulers, paper weights, wall clocks, carvings, clay figures, ash trays, table cloths, trivets, place mats, cutlery, bottle openers, coasters, mugs, tea sets, hand trays, aprons, pot holders, oven mitts, kitchen towels, and toaster and blender covers. Also included were ackee-shaped salt and peppershakers and bells.

4. "Ackee" is the Jamaican common name for the tree and fruit, and although it is of West African origin (Hutchinson, Dalziel and Keay 1958), it entered the English language from Jamaica (Cassidy 1971:394). Historically the word is spelled in a variety of ways. "Akee" is now the standard form in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and in many American publications. In Jamaica, however, "ackee" is the acceptable spelling which is more in keeping with speech (Cassidy and Le Page 1980:3-4).

5. The flower's color has been described as "greenish-yellow" (Adams 1971b:34), "white" (Little, Woodbury and Wadsworth 1974:486), "greenish-white" (Taylor 1948:108, Bailey and Bailey 1976:167, Kingsbury 1988), and "creamy white" (Morton 1981:485).

6. Bailey and Bailey (1976:167) describe the aril as white in color.

7. This is probably why Jamaicans view saltfish as a "remedy" for ackee, a "remedy" being, according to Cassidy and Le Page (1980:380), "any food which traditionally goes along with some other food and improves it, e.g., BREADFRUIT-REMEDY for run-down, SALTFISH-REMEDY for ackee."

8. The ackee was unknown in Europe prior to Broughton's account. Charles Konig's description and

naming of the tree (in commemoration of Bligh after whom the genus is named) was not published until 1806. It was based on Broughton's work, and on the ackee specimens Bligh took from Jamaica to Kew Botanical Garden after delivering the breadfruit to St. Vincent and Jamaica in 1793.

9. Those who claim the ackee arrived in 1778, or that Clarke introduced it, have misinterpreted Broughton. Broughton credits Clarke, not with introducing it to Jamaica, but with introducing it to the garden of Hinton East. Lewis (1961.), Ashurst (1961:4) and Adams (1971b:32) concur. Unfortunately, their accounts are as vague as Broughton's when it comes to identifying exactly when the ackee was brought to Jamaica in a "slave ship," and whether it was Clarke himself (Has-sall and Reyle 1955:83), or someone else who received it. Although the earliest studies of Jamaica's natural history do not mention the ackee (e.g., Sloane 1696, 1707-25; Browne 1756; Long 1774; Barham 1794), it is difficult to understand how Lunan's report of the tree's island wide distribution could have occurred in a mere 21 years if Clarke himself had gotten the ackee from a "slave ship." This is especially so, considering that by 1859, just 45 years after Lunan's account, and 81 years after Broughton's catalogue, Grisebach described the ackee as being "naturalized in Jamaica" (1859:125).

10. In some parts of the eastern Caribbean, "ackee" identifies *Melicoccus bilugatus*, not *Blighia sapida* (Adams 1971:16, Cassidy and Le Page 1980:4), and *Blighia sapida* is distinguished as "Jamaican ackee."

11. The fear of poisoning causes some Jamaicans to avoid ackee, some to eat fruits only from their own trees, or from trees of family and friends, some to buy whole fruits which they "shell" themselves, and some (especially in Kingston) to ask vendors to "shell" the fruits so that arils with soft spots, small seeds or discoloration can be replaced before they are purchased.

12. Some Jamaicans do make an effort to protect their ackee crop, especially from birds. My father said when he was a boy some people built bird snares in ackee trees. Williams (1954:24) reports that some of her informants had "observed crows and bats attacking the fruit." Jeffrey-Smith (1972:55) says parrots "enjoy ackees" and that when "ackees are in season [red-bellied] woodpeckers [*Centurus radiolatus*] may be seen devouring the ripe fruit, of which they are very fond and eat appreciable quantities." And in "Countryman's Diary," a well-known column in the *Daily Gleaner* (September 18, 1976), the author describes his wife's effort to protect their ackee crop from birds in an article titled "My Wife and the Birds."

13. Only one informant used shelf-ripened ackee for home consumption, and although some informants suspected market vendors of selling shelf-ripened fruits, the vendors themselves said this was not regarded as acceptable practice.

14. Davidson (1971:29) writes: "Some people eat raw

arils without any apparent ill effects and my mother used to tell me how as children in St. Vincent, she and her brothers picked and ate the fruit as 'ackee poisoning' was unknown."

15. Jamaicans regard the red fiber as poisonous, and care is taken to remove all traces of it from the aril.

16. Reflecting the consequences of the increasing cost of saltfish, Donaldson (1993:66) writes: "Recently since the price of salted cod has sky-rocketed, there has been some juggling of the proportion of ackee to saltfish in Jamaica's national dish. In fact, ackee can now even stand alone with the usual accompaniments of onion, tomato and scallion. Ackee has also entered into some new marriages . . ." Two years later, in an article in the *Daily Gleaner* Newspaper titled "Saltfish price to soar" (November 11, 1995), Marjorie Powis, 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." When she interviewed Earl Patrick, a manager for Grace Kennedy and Co. Ltd., one of the major distributors of saltfish, he said, "Grace wants to continue to sell salt fish, but if the price continues to soar we will have to find an alternative."

17. No one interviewed regarded this as a proverb. 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, guest houses and restaurants.

19. A copy of this report is at the Botany Department of the Institute of Jamaica in Kingston.

20. This error has crept into the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* where Cassidy and Le Page (1980:460) describe "wacky" as rare, sub-dialect, and of "unknown" etymology; they cite Jekyll as the source. The

error also appears in the work of Louise Bennett who (following Jekyll [1966:100]) titled her version of the story "Cubbitch an de Wacky" (Bennett 1984).

21. This story has been shortened by removing as much repetition as possible.

22. Beckwith (1929:44) suggests Jamaicans symbolically associate the opening of ackees with "yawning" and Lynch, Larson and Doughty (1951:284), Morton (1981:486, 1982:64, 1987:271, 1990:406), Chase, Landen and Soliman (1990:319) 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 1971), 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" says Bates (1896:125), and of Sarah Miller's comparison of her rival to the ackee tree, he writes: "The beauty of the simile will be appreciated by those familiar with the fruit."

24. The expression "you tek ackee boil soup, gal you want fe come kill me?" which Hill (1952:255) identified as a proverb is probably just a fragment of this song.

25. Several variant ending lines for "Blessed Assurance" have been omitted, and so have three verses of "We Three Kings".

26. For example, in 1989, the gift shop of the Wyndham Hotel, Trelawney, had four kinds of clay pieces made by Mrs. Merdina 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. Everald 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" (Poupeye-Rammelaere 1988).