

Research Application Summary

Socio-cultural aspects in harvesting of Jackfruit in Busia County, Kenya

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Abstract

This study assessed the socio-cultural dimensions of harvesting jackfruit in Busia County of Kenya. Data were collected using quantitative and qualitative methods with farmers (i.e., structured interviews, key informant interviews and field observations). Jackfruit is mainly harvested by men. However, elderly males are not allowed to harvest fruits because they are accorded high status in the community. In some it is considered a cultural taboo. They are also said to be unable to differentiate mature and non-mature fruits. It is also felt that they cannot climb the jackfruit tree to harvest. They are also discouraged from climbing trees to avoid accidents. Women are not allowed to harvest jackfruit. It is a cultural taboo for women to climb trees. Women are also thought to be unable to tolerate the weight of the jackfruit during harvesting. However, even though culture prohibits women (from climbing trees, they can harvest low-hanging fruits within their reach from the ground. It was believed that if the women climb the jackfruit trees to harvest the fruits, the remaining fruits will rot, and the tree will stop fruiting. The study also found out that the fruit is neglected and not regarded as having economic value. The study highlights the importance of understanding and adapting to local practices and socio-cultural aspects within the design of strategies to commercialise the fruit.

Key words: Food security, Kenya, nutrition, underutilised fruits

Résumé

Cette étude a évalué les dimensions socioculturelles de la récolte du jacquier dans le Comté de Busia au Kenya. Les données ont été collectées en utilisant des méthodes qualitatives et quantitatives auprès des agriculteurs (c'est-à-dire des interviews structurés, des interviews auprès des informateurs clés et des observations sur terrain). Le jacquier est principalement récolté par les hommes. Cependant, les hommes âgés ne sont pas autorisés à récolter ses fruits car ils sont accordés d'un statut élevé dans la communauté. Chez certains, il est

considéré comme un tabou culturel. Ils seraient également jugés incapables de différencier les fruits mûrs et non mûrs. Aussi, il est présumé qu'ils ne peuvent pas grimper sur le jacquier pour récolter. Ils sont également découragés de grimper sur les arbres pour éviter les accidents. Les femmes ne sont pas autorisées de récolter le jacquier. C'est un tabou culturel pour les femmes de grimper sur les arbres. Les femmes sont également présumées incapables de tolérer le poids du jacquier pendant la récolte. Cependant, même si la culture interdit aux femmes de grimper sur les arbres, elles peuvent récolter des fruits à faible portée à partir du sol. Il était présumé que si les femmes grimpaient sur les jacquiers pour récolter les fruits, les fruits restants pourriraient et l'arbre cesserait de fructifier. L'étude a également révélé que le fruit est négligé et n'est pas considéré comme ayant une valeur économique. L'étude souligne l'importance de comprendre et de s'adapter aux pratiques locales et aux aspects socioculturels dans la conception de stratégies pour commercialiser le fruit.

Mots clés: Sécurité alimentaire, Kenya, nutrition, fruits sous-utilisés

Introduction

Jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam.) is an important crop for rural communities because of its environmental resilience. The fruit is reported to have high nutritional and medicinal properties (Swami *et al.*, 2012; Ubi *et al.*, 2016). However, despite all these merits, jackfruit has remained one of the most underutilised fruits in Kenya and many parts of Africa. Jackfruit is a common crop in Busia County of Western Kenya. However, research and development initiatives to create a favourable framework for its commercialisation is limited. Existing documentation show that jackfruit production is scattered, unreliable and inconsistent, making it difficult to justify development of improvement programmes. Little is known about the local practices and the socio-cultural practices regarding harvesting of the fruit. This study was done to determine sociocultural aspects involved in harvesting of jackfruit in Busia County, Kenya. This is part of interrelated studies which aim to introduce, promote and commercialise underutilised fruits in Kenya, with the objective of enhancing human nutrition and health in rural communities.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in six out of the seven sub-counties of Busia County, Kenya. Data were collected through structured interviews with jackfruit farmers (n=291), traders (n=6), key informant interviews (n=5) and field observations. Key informants included Agricultural Officers, prominent jackfruit traders and village elders. Sites visited and observed included farms where jackfruit trees were grown (to observe varieties grown, size of the trees, disease infestations, etc.). The study area and data collection methods are described in Ochieng *et al.* (2018).

Results and Discussions

Gender involvement of in harvesting of jackfruit. Of the respondents interviewed, 90.4% reported that male adults are not allowed to harvest jackfruit. The main reasons given were that

males are accorded high status in the community, and because of traditional beliefs that consider it a cultural taboo (Table 1).

For adult females, 43.3% of the respondents reported that they are not allowed to harvest jackfruit. The main reasons were because of cultural taboo prohibiting women from climbing trees (64.0%), to avoid accidents (32.6%), and because the fruit would be too heavy to be carried down the trees by women (3.4%) (Table 2). Jackfruit is the largest tree-borne fruit in the world, weighing up to 50 kg and measuring 60-90 cm in length (Popenoe, 1974). Even though culture prohibits women (female gender) from climbing trees, they can harvest low-hanging fruits near the ground. It was also believed that if the women climb the jackfruit trees to harvest the fruits, the remaining fruits will rot, and the tree will stop fruiting.

Table 1. Reasons for male adults not allowed to harvest jackfruit in Busia County, Kenya

Reasons for male adults not allowed to harvest jackfruit	Responses	
	Frequency	Percent
Male adults are accorded status in the community	6	33.3
Tradition / cultural taboo	4	22.2
Cannot differentiate mature and non-mature fruit	3	16.7
Unable to climb the tree	3	16.7
To avoid accidents (injury from heavy jackfruit, falling, etc.)	1	5.6
They may not know how to climb the tree	1	5.6
Total	18	100.0

Table 1. Reasons for male adults not allowed to harvest jackfruit in Busia County, Kenya

Reasons for female adults not allowed to harvest jackfruit	Responses	
	Frequency	Percent
Cultural taboo for women to climb tree or ladder	57	64.0
To avoid accidents (injury from heavy jackfruit, falling, etc.)	29	32.6
Cannot tolerate the weight of the jackfruit by holding it while harvesting	3	3.4
Total	89	100.0

Children (both boys and girls) are not allowed to harvest jackfruit. The main reasons were to avoid accidents (injury from heavy jackfruit, falling while climbing the tree, etc.). Children too cannot tolerate the weight of the jackfruit after harvest. In addition, cultural taboos prohibit women of all ages from climb trees. However, once harvested the postharvest handling and marketing of jackfruit can be performed by all gender in the society.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study shows that culture plays an important role in the harvesting of jackfruit, with varied gendered roles. There were distinct socio-cultural values in the harvesting of jackfruit, women and girls not allowed to climb jackfruit trees for harvesting. However, they have a major role in determining how the fruit is consumed or when to be sold. Strategies to commercialise jackfruit should consider the socio-cultural issues involved in the jackfruit value chain.

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