Parkia biglobosa

[Synonyms : *Inga biglobosa*, *Inga senegalensis*, *Mimosa biglobosa*, *Parkia africana*, *Parkia clappertoniana*, *Parkia filicoidea*, *Parkia intermedia*, *Parkia oliveri*, *Parkia roxburghii*]

AFRICAN LOCUST is a deciduous tree. Native to tropical western Africa, it has small, red or orange flowers, followed by fruit pods.

It is also known as African locust bean, *Arbre à farine* (French), Clapperton's parkia, *Dadawa* (Hausa), *Dawa dawa* (Hausa), *Farroba* (Portuguese), *Kedaung* (Indonesian), Locust bean tree, *Mimosa pourpre* (French), *Néré* (French), *Nittabaum* (German), Nitta nut, Nutta nut, *Qiu hua dou* (Chinese), and West African locust bean.

The flower heads last one night.

Together with bees, the bats are the prime pollinators of the flowers – the flowers are rich in nectar and bats visit the tree at night to sip this. The seeds are dispersed by birds and mammals.

Biglobosa is derived from Latin *bi-* (two) and *globosi-* (round) components meaning 'two spheres'.

The value of African locust's fruit to the local community is strikingly illustrated by reports that indicate how farmers cultivating sorghum *Sorghum bicolor* in some remote areas still allow this tree (and shea *Vitellaria paradoxa*) to grow among their crops even though their sorghum yield is likely to be drastically reduced (70% by the former and 50% by the latter). The sweet-tasting, yellow fruit flesh is used to make drinks and the roasted seeds are ground for a coffee sometimes referred to as *café du Sudan*. In addition to the edible flesh from the long and narrow, blackish-brown fruit pods (said to be a particular delicacy in children's eyes), the hard seeds are processed to produce a powder or paste that are an important source of protein and known widely as 'Soumbala'.

The preparation of soumbala can be quite complicated and time-consuming and as it has a fairly short shelf-life the procedures involved have become woven into everyday life in many communities in the western African region. After the seeds have been repeatedly boiled they are husked. Then (often mixed with wood ash to reduce the smell) they are left to ferment for several days in leaf-lined baskets. Once fermented they are partially dried, or they are pounded to a cheesy paste and formed into balls or pyramids that are stored for later use. Soumbala in ultimate dried seed form is used as a condiment or garnish – and as a paste it offers a nutritious flavouring for soups, stews and sweetmeats. Apart from dietary and traditional practices there are also economic considerations for the families in these communities as the production of soumbala could be viewed effectively as a cottage industry. Many of the women regularly made soumbala in their own homes, not just for their own use but also as a source of income as they sold it in the local markets.

Today the just described diet, as well as the associated traditional practices and economic benefits may well be under threat. Foreign commercial flavourings are being aggressively promoted by Western international food processing conglomerates. Authorities report that these foreign flavourings have lower calories and dietary protein but perceived advantages of a far longer shelf-life and ready-made ease of preparation and have begun to infiltrate the region supported by intensive and often aggressive advertising campaigns.

Aware of this, local research together with subsequent guidance has encouraged at least one local entrepreneur to begin commercial production of soumbala. If this enterprise expands it will mean that the diet in the region will not be impoverished to the same extent as could be predicted from the use of imported products – even though soumbala's local commercial production would still have a significant impact eventually on traditional practices and incomes in individual homes.

The thick, reddish-brown bark has been used for tanning and staining leather red. It has also provided a dye. Some authorities have noted that the fruit have been used as a mordant in indigo dyeing.

Today still some traditional potters in tropical western Africa make a diluted gum solution from the fruit pods. This is used to seal the pots and produces the mottled surface on them for which they are especially singled out.

Local fshermen have thrown fruit pod shells into the water to stun fish.

It is reported that in the dry season farmers have broken off branches from surrounding growth in order to make it easier for livestock to get at the tree's young leaves, shoots and fruit pods. The dried seeds have also offered animal fodder.

Locusts are known to gorge on the fruit pods and strip the trees bare.

The very hard, reddish-brown wood has been used locally for general carpentry and is said to be sought after for carving. It yields a high quality charcoal and has also been burnt as fuel.

Medicinally, the seeds have been used in local treatments for stomach upsets – and in The Gambia the bark has been used for easing toothache. With the leaves and fruit pulp as well, some authorities note that the various parts of the tree account for treatments for at least 40 different ailments in African medicine apart from those already mentioned, including dysentery, intestinal disorders, bronchitis, asthma, ulcers, rickets, sore throat and dermatitis.