Promoting fonio production in West and Central Africa through germplasm management and improvement of post harvest technology

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By

Raymond S. VODOUHE & Alimou Diallo Thierno
Project Team:

Project Coordinator: Raymond Vodouhè

Collaborating scientists and organizations:

• Pierrette Glèle: INRAB (Benin)

• Alimou Diallo: IRAG (Guinea)

• Amadou Sidibé: IER (Mali),

• Danladi Kuta: NCRI (Nigeria),
The crop

- Fonio (*Digitaria exilis* Kipp. Stapf and *Digitaria iburua* Stapf) are minor cereal crop species which are cultivated throughout West Africa from Senegal to Lake Chad.
- In this zone, fonio is either a staple food or food for hunger period. It supplies food to 3-4 million people.
- It is also increasingly highly prized by nutritionists for its richness in methionine and cystine, two amino acids vital to human health but deficient in major cereals such as wheat, rice, maize, sorghum or barley.
The crop

Since 1974, Fonio is in the USA Academy of Sciences priority list for underexploited African tropical plants with promising economic value in West and Central Africa.
Exploration and collection of germplasm of fonio (Digitaria excilis)

Countries visited: Benin, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, Togo
• Grain of fonio
Husked grain of fonio

Unhusked grain of fonio
Project Description

- The overall goal of the project is to promote the production of fonio in West Africa.

- More specifically the project aims at improving the seed systems and on-farm germplasm management of fonio, to conserve the genetic diversity of the crop and to enhance its processing techniques.
Project Description

The project has three major components:
• Collecting, characterization and evaluation of germplasm:

This component includes local germplasm collecting in Benin, Mali and Nigeria and their agro-morphological and biochemical characterization.
Project Description (Cont.)

• Post-harvest technology: This component includes assessment of fonio grain loss from harvest to threshing and testing of various threshing and hulling methods.

• Traditional seed system: Farmers practices for fonio seed production and dissemination were assessed.

N.B: The project also facilitated the organization of national meetings of various actors involved in research, production, processing and trade of fonio to share views and to identify priority areas for research and/or development actions.
Outcomes: Germplasm collecting, characterisation/evaluation

• **Collecting germplasm**
  • In Mali, 24 ecotypes/accessions have been collected in Bogoro, Diagani, Somo and Nongosso (San) and Bumbolo, Sokoro, Sadien and Kin (Tominian).
  • There are very little differences among cultivars collected from one village to another. For example, the variety Wèlè wèlè is present in several villages.
Outcomes: Germplasm collecting, characterisation/evaluation

Collecting germplasm (Cont.)

It was observed that names given to cultivars by farmers are not very distinctive feature. Two distinct varieties could have the same name but are different for morphological and genetic traits. Farmers may also give different names to the same variety according to ethnic group and trait most valued by a given community. 

NB: A threatened variety is identified in Somo: Ebe Ohoun which is a medium to long duration variety (100 days).
Outcomes: Germplasm collecting, charact/evaluation

Agro morphological characterization and evaluation

• In Nigeria, 62 accessions were characterized. Morphological traits used are growth cycle, grain colour, seed colour, leaf-tip shape, internodes, leaf pubescence, culm type etc.

• The results indicated that several cultivars could not be separated based on agro morphological characterization
Cytogenetic studies

Ten accessions tested in Nigeria showed very little variation in chromosome numbers and are mostly euploids. Most of the accessions studied are hexaploid with chromosome number of $2n=54$, while few are diploid with chromosome number of $2n=30$ and $2n=34$. 
Outcomes: Germplasm collecting, charact/evaluation

Cytogenetic studies (Cont.)

In Benin three accessions of black fonio (D. iburua) from Togo and eighty eight (88) accessions of true fonio (D. exilis) from Benin, Guinea, Mali and Togo were evaluated. Mean values of nuclear DNA content calculated for the different landraces of Benin and Togo showed that D. exilis and D. iburua have similar nuclear DNA content (about 2 pg).
Figure 3: Histograms of relative nuclear DNA content obtained after analysis of nuclei isolated from young leaf tissues of *Raphanus* and *Digitaria*. 
Outcomes: Germplasm collecting, charact/evaluation

Cytogenetic studies (Cont.)

Figure 4: *Digitaria exilis* chromosomes (2n=36) accession from Ben2. (A): Spatial somatic metaphase cell (stereo pair can be observed with prism classes or without glasses at a distance of about 30 cm); (B): Karyogram established from the same cell
Outcomes: Germplasm collecting, charact/evaluation

Cytogenetic studies (Cont.)

Synthesis of results obtained from the two countries revealed that the chromosome number for D. exilis varies from 2n = 34, to 2n = 54 and 2n = 30 to 2n = 34 for D. iburua. These are indications that more are needed on the crop DNA nuclear content and ploidy in order to determine accurately factors influencing its genetic diversity.
Outcomes: Seed Systems

The community seed system was assessed in all 4 countries.

**Benin:** Fifty farmers were surveyed in 11 villages. The results indicated that the main seed sources are from farmers’ stores. Seeds are obtained through exchange among farmers. Seeds are well conserved in clay granaries for one to two years maximum after which a decrease in viability is observed. Women farmers are queen in seed conservation, but distribution is done by men.

- **Guinea:** Among 295 people surveyed, 112 said they produced their own seeds. Most of them answered that the major seed source is from previous harvests. Seed is also acquired as gifts from colleagues (83 respondents) and by exchange (74 respondents). Very few farmers buy fonio seed from markets (22 respondents only).
Tata Somba in North West of Bein

Granary
Tata Somba in North West of Bein Granary
Project Outcomes

Community seed system: The community seed system was assessed in all 4 countries.

Benin: Fifty farmers were surveyed in 11 villages. The results indicated that the main seed sources are from farmers' stores. Seeds are obtained through exchange among farmers. Farmers indicated that seeds conserved in clay granaries maintained good viability for one to two years after which a decrease is observed. Women farmers are keen in conserving the seed but seed distribution is done by men.
Outcomes: Testing threshing and milling techniques in Benin

The experiment was conducted in Boukombé, north west Benin. The investigation took place in three households. In each household three threshing methods and three husking methods were tested. The threshing methods were: threshing on paved soil, threshing on non paved soil and threshing on canvas sheet. For the husking, three technologies are used: husking with mortar, husking in a hole in the ground and husking with Sanoussi Diakité’s machine.
Outcomes: Testing threshing and milling techniques in Benin Cont.)

Threshing on canvas sheet method and husking with the Sanoussi machine are new technologies developed by research and agricultural services. While the other methods of threshing or husking are traditional
Fonio: A treasure for West Africa

Vodouhè S. R.¹, E. Achigan Dako¹, A. Dansi² & H. Adoukonou-Sagbadja²

1. International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (West and Central Africa Sub-Office) 08 BP:0932 IPGRI-Benin E-mail: r.vodouhe@cgiar.org
2. Crop, Aromatic and Medicinal plant Biodiversity Research and Development Institute (IPDAMI)

Introduction
Fonio, one of the oldest and richest cereals of West Africa, is unknown to many people and neglected by research and extension services. Adapted to poor soils and limited water supply, fonio is an excellent dry areas crop which grows and produces where other crops fail.

Origin and distribution
West Africa is home to three unique millets: Digitaria exilis (white fonio), Digitaria iburua (black fonio) and Bracharia deflexa (guinea millet/fonio)

Legend: (Fonio is the oldest cereal of West Africa and is widely grown from Senegal to Lake Chad, on the Fouta Djallon in Guinea, the Bauchi-Plateau in Nigeria and in north-west Benin and scattered elsewhere.

Important crop, but neglected
- For a long time, research activities in the region have been oriented towards major cereals such as maize, rice and sorghum. The interest in fonio is relatively recent. The crop has been neglected by research and extension services. Factors that contribute to its low yield and that need to be the focus of research are:
  - its tiny grain: 1000 grains weigh about 0.44g
  - its shattering characteristic: fonio easily shatters at maturity and grain losses of 10 to 30% occur if the harvest is delayed (fig 3).
  - inappropriate harvesting technique: local tools and traditional harvesting methods lead to significant loss between the cutting and threshing areas.

The strenuousness of traditional threshing and husking methods used, which generally result in poor quality of the final product, are additional reasons for the neglect of the crop (Fig. 4).

Varieties
Through participatory approach, major limiting factors to the promotion of the crop was identified by farmers, processing units and research institutes.

Improvement of threshing and husking methods: a new husking machine is developed (SANOUSSI’s husker). New threshing and Husking practices are being tested.

Improvement of the product quality: techniques and methods to produce sandless fonio (premium fonio) are being developed.

Results
National/International research institutes and development organizations in the sub region are now devoting more attention to the crop. The following results have been achieved:

- Genetic diversity and production: germplasm of fonio is collected, characterized and conserved. Promising cultivars are selected and released to farmers.
- Improvement of threshing and husking methods: a new husking machine is developed (SANOUSSI’s husker). New threshing and Husking practices are being tested.
- Improvement of the product quality: techniques and methods to produce sandless fonio (premium fonio) are being developed.
- More people are now interested in fonio for its qualities. To satisfy an ever increasing demand, farmers and processing units expressed concerns about existing cropping and processing systems. Research efforts in recent years are yielding promising results and should be encouraged and supported at national and international levels.

Conclusion

Fig 1: Fonio crop distribution in West and Central Africa
Fig 2: Harvested fonio (at the left) and woman selling fonio in a local market in Togo (at the right)
Fig 3: Average grain number of fonio panicle and losses level (in %) from harvest to threshing
Fig 4: Fonio threshing area (a woman holding the threshing pestle)
Fig 5: Sanoussi husker: a small machine for a big task
Fig 6: Harvested fonio (at the left) and woman selling fonio in a local market in Togo (at the right)
Outcomes: Testing threshing and milling techniques in Benin (Cont.)

- The results indicated that the use of canvas has not significantly contributed to increase threshing yield (45% vs 42.5% without canvas). However, the farmers witnessed that when canvas is used, there is very little sand in the final product and there is gain of time and in water used to clean the product.
- It was clearly demonstrated that the combined use of canvas and Sanoussi’s machine is the most efficient processing method. It improved the quality of the final product and contributed to a savings of time, labour and water.
Outcomes: Testing threshing and milling techniques in Benin (Cont.)

• In Guinea the imported machine GMBF 02 gives very interesting husking, milling and winnowing results:
  • Husking: up to 130Kg/h with an average husking index of 75%.
  • Milling: 200Kg/hour with 90% milling yield
Outcomes: Testing threshing methods in Guinea

*Three threshing methods were compared: 1) threshing machine "Type ASSI’; 2) threshing with stick; 3) foot threshing*

- The mechanical threshing assured good quality product and reduced labour and time needed to clean the product.; the rate of non threshed panicle is only 2% against 8% for foot threshing and 10.5% for the stick. Threshing with machine requires 70% less time than manual threshing.
Outcomes: Assessing grain loss in Guinea

The grain losses recorded at maturity, harvest and during transportation to the threshing surface were evaluated. Losses are evaluated at four stages: 1) before maturity; 2) at maturity; 3) at harvest; 4) and during transportation to threshing area.

The results revealed that the average number of grains of 10 panicles decreased from 1280 to 799 grains from pre maturity (phase 1) to the threshing area (phase 4) with an overall loss of 35.5%.
Outcomes: Assessing grain loss in Guinea

The assessment of the losses during the post harvest operations is very important as it indicates the great portion of grain lost due to mismanagement. Any improvement of the technology at that stage will substantially improve the total grain yield by 20 to 30% and make the crop more attractive to farmers.
Outcomes: Biochemical characterization in Mali

- Eleven varieties of D. exilis from Guinea, Mali and Benin were tested.
- The results showed that the protein content varied according to varieties between 7.86 and 16.97 g/100g. The variety Wélé wélé showed the highest protein content (16.97 g/100g). This is very important as protein contents for cereals reported in the same area range from 9 to 12 %.
- All tested varieties have similar carbohydrate content (77.9 - 80.25 g/100g) except for accession Wélé Wélé which showed the lowest carbohydrate content (70.85 g/100g).
Outcomes: Biochemical characterization in Mali

- The lipid content is also similar for all varieties (3.12 - 4.06 g/100g). With regards to the mineral contents, the results revealed that, phosphorus and potassium are the major. This is similar for other cereals such as sorghum or maize.
Le fonio: un regain d’intérêt en Afrique de l’Ouest

Le fonio (Digitaria exilis) est certainement la plus ancienne céréale cultivée en Afrique de l’Ouest. À cause des difficultés de transformation surtout du décorticage, il est resté longtemps à l’état de céréale marginale.

La mécanisation des opérations post-récoltes a ouvert de nouvelles perspectives pour mieux valoriser le fonio sur le marché urbain où il est bien apprécié. Le fonio qui a été longtemps considéré comme une céréale mineure, la « céréale du pauvre » connaît de nos jours un regain d’intérêt en zone urbaine en raison des qualités gustatives et nutritionnelles que lui reconnaissent, les consommateurs.

Spontanément et avec l’appui des autorités locales et de diverses organisations non gouvernementales, de nouveaux produits à base de cette céréale et de nouveaux circuits de commercialisation émergent.

Le fonio, une céréale de bonnes qualités nutritionnelles

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Le fonio, une céréale consommée sous plusieurs formes

Trois principales formes de préparation du fonio sont largement répandues dans la sous-région :
- Le couscous indique un mode de cuisson des grains à la vapeur. Celui-ci peut être accompagné d’une sauce salée ou de lait et de sucre.
- Le fonio "au gras" est le mode de cuisson des grains directement dans une sauce grasse avec des légumes et de la viande ou du poisson.
- La bouillie indique un mode de cuisson dans l’eau. Elle peut être légère, plus ou moins épaisse jusqu’à former une pâte consistante (tô de fonio).
- Les farcis, les croquettes sont de nouvelles formes qui viennent varier le plat du citadin.

Le fonio: une céréale de grande diversité génétique

46 variétés ont été identifiées en Guinée :
- 16 variétés extra précoces (70 –85 jours et 500 – 1 000 kg/ha) ;
- 15 variétés précoces (85 –100 jours et 800 – 1 500 kg/ha) ;
- 15 variétés semi-tardives (100 –120 jours et 1500 – 2 500 kg/ha).

Les études techniques réalisées dans le cadre du projet sous-régional CFC – Fonio, ont abouti à l’adaptation d’une batteuse et à la mise au point d’un décortiqueur blanchisseur GMBF de type « engelberg » et de plusieurs équipements de nettoyage : canal de vannage,, cribles rotatifs,, dessableur. Certains de ces équipements ont été installés en zone rurale et dans de petites entreprises, à Bamako au Mali, à Labé en Guinée, à Bobo Dioulasso au Burkina.

Des efforts restent à fournir pour mettre à la disposition des utilisateurs, les technologies mises au point.
Conclusions and perspectives

- Characterization of germplasms of fonio collected in Benin, Guinea, Mali and Nigeria revealed limited intraspecific diversity, but more studies are needed to confirm interactions genotype/environment and interactions between morphological traits and amino acid content of grains.

- Grain loss at harvest heavily affects the crop yield and therefore compromises farmers’ production efforts. In-depth studies of factors controlling the shattering habit of fonio will be beneficial for improving the crop yield.
Conclusions and perspectives

• Existing threshing and milling methods generally yield poor quality final product (high percent of sand, stone and other scraps). Using threshing and husking or milling machines improves the quality of the product and increase its market value. The high cost of the modern equipment made it unaffordable to individual farmers. While waiting for private sectors or Government support to make this material available at local communities levels, adoption of intermediate technologies (Combination of canvas and mortar) is proposed.
Conclusions and perspectives

• A second phase of the project is needed for more investigations in the following areas:
  – Testing and selection of varieties with good yield potential, low shatering habit, rich in favourable amino acids,
  – Facilitating farmers’ access to improve seeds
  – Developing and testing in collaboration with farmers appropriate cropping systems
  – Creating and testing locally reproductible threshing, husking and milling equipment
  – Exploring new markets for fonio products.
THANK YOU

JE VOUS REMERCIÉ