

ABSTRACT

Cassava (*Manihot esculenta* Crantz) is an important source of carbohydrate for humans and animals, producing high energy of 610 kJ/100 g fresh root weight. However, it is very poor in protein (1 % fresh root weight) and contains cyanogenic glucosides which are related to various health disorders that occur in populations where cassava is the staple food. Cassava products that are not adequately processed have been linked to diseases like *konzo*, caused by cyanide poisoning, as was the case in Nampula Province, Mozambique.

Samples of cassava flour were collected in 4 different districts in Nampula Province, Mozambique and the cassava processing methods were recorded. Cassava processing techniques used in Nampula Province consist of peeling, chipping or grating, sun-drying or fermenting followed by sun-drying, and finally pounding into flour. There was a large variation in the average cyanogenic potentials of flours from the different districts, ranging from 26 ± 20 to 90 ± 60 mg HCN/kg. The average total cyanogenic content for the unfermented samples (64 ± 60 mg HCN/kg) was significantly greater than that of the fermented samples (34 ± 30 mg HCN/kg).

Biochemical and microbial changes occurring during the heap fermentation of cassava roots were determined and predominant micro-organisms were isolated and identified. The total crude protein and cyanogenic potential were determined in dried fermented and unfermented cassava flour. The moulds, *Rhizopus stolonifer* and *Neurospora sitophila* were the dominant microbes involved in the heap fermentation of cassava followed by lactic acid bacteria, *Leuconostoc pseudomesenteroides*, *Leuconostoc mesenteroides*, *Enterococcus faecium* and *Weissella cibaria*. The pH values of the cassava roots decreased from 6.1 ± 0.01 to 5.6 ± 0.6 during heap fermentation.

Heap fermentation of cassava resulted in a decrease in the total cyanogenic potential levels. The average total cyanogenic level in unfermented cassava flour was 158 mg HCN/kg, while in fermented cassava flour, a value of 17 mg HCN/kg was recorded. The average cyanogenic potential of fresh cassava roots was 259 ± 9 mg HCN/kg. Protein concentration in the cassava flour slightly increased from 1.3% to 1.8% w/w dry matter during fermentation.

Laboratory simulation of the heap fermentation of cassava roots using isolated moulds was carried out to determine the growth and change in texture of the cassava roots. *Neurospora sitophila* grew faster than *Rhizopus stolonifer* on cassava roots under controlled conditions. *Rhizopus stolonifer* softened the cassava roots more than the *Neurospora sitophila*. Slicing the cassava roots increased the rate of mould growth and the softness of the roots during the fermentation.

Studies were carried out to increase the protein content of cassava flour by the co-fermentation of cassava roots with cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*) using selected moulds. Co-fermentation of cassava roots with cowpea flour, at a proportion of 92:8 (cassava:cowpea), resulted in faster growth of moulds, rapid softening of cassava roots and an increase in the protein content of the flour. The final protein content in cowpea supplemented cassava flour was 7.93 ± 0.98 % dry weight basis, similar to the maize grain. The flour produced from cassava roots co-fermented with cowpea produced a paste (*karakata*) of lower viscosity and higher sensory acceptability compared to that prepared using flour from cassava roots fermented without cowpea.

Heap fermentation of cassava roots reduced the cyanogenic potential of the roots but did not achieve the FAO/WHO recommended safe limit of 10 mg HCN/kg when bitter varieties were used. Supplementation of cassava roots with cowpea produced a flour with lower cyanogen content, higher protein content and lower viscosity compared to flour produced from unsupplemented cassava roots.

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CONTENTS

	Page
1.0 INTRODUCTION	1
2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW	4
2.1 ORIGIN AND BOTANY OF CASSAVA	4
2.1.1 The origin and distribution of cassava	4
2.1.2 Taxonomy of cassava	4
2.1.3 Physiology and morphology of cassava	4
2.2 PRODUCTION AND IMPORTANCE OF CASSAVA.....	7
2.2.1 Ecology.....	7
2.2.2 Cassava production.....	7
2.2.3 Importance of cassava.....	7
2.3 CHEMICAL AND NUTRITIONAL COMPOSITION OF CASSAVA	8
2.3.1 Chemical and nutritional composition of cassava roots.....	8
2.4 CYANOGENIC GLUCOSIDES	10
2.4.1 Cyanogenic glucosides in the plant kingdom	10
2.4.2 Distribution of cyanogenic glucosides in cassava plants.....	11
2.4.3 Biosynthesis of cyanogenic glucosides.....	11
2.4.4 Hydrolysis of cyanogenic glucosides	12
2.4.5 Toxicology of cyanogenic of cassava	13
2.4.6 Mechanisms of cyanogen detoxification by the human body	14
2.4.7 Methods for the analysis of cyanogenic glucosides....	15
2.4.7.1 Titration method	16
2.4.7.2 Alkaline picrate method	16
2.4.7.3 Colorimetric method	17
2.5 CASSAVA PROCESSING	17
2.5.1 Cassava post harvest deterioration	17
2.5.2 Processing of cassava roots	18
2.5.2.1 <i>Boiling</i>	18
2.5.2.2 <i>Sun drying</i>	18
2.5.2.3 <i>Fermentation</i>	19

2.5.3 Biochemistry of fermentation of cassava roots and the role of bacteria and fungi ...	20
2.5.4 Mycotoxins in cassava products	22
2.5.5 Improvement of protein content of cassava products using microbial techniques ...	22
3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS	27
3.1 CYANOGENIC POTENTIAL OF CASSAVA FLOUR SAMPLES COLLECTED FROM SELECTED DISTRICTS OF NAMPULA PROVINCE, MOZAMBIQUE	27
3.1.1 Study area	27
3.1.2 Sample collection	27
3.1.3 Analysis of cyanogenic potential of cassava flour samples	29
3.1.3.1 Preparation of assay reagents	29
3.1.3.2 Assay of enzyme activity	30
3.1.3.3 Extraction of cyanogens	30
3.1.3.4 Preparation of KCN Standard... ..	30
3.1.3.5 Determination of cyanogenic potential	31
3.1.4 Moisture and dry matter content	32
3.1.5 Data treatment	32
3.2 MICROBIAL AND BIOCHEMICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CASSAVA HEAP FERMENTATION	32
3.2.1 Study area	32
3.2.2 Traditional heap fermentation	32
3.2.3 Enumeration of microbes	33
3.2.4 Isolation of microbes	33
3.2.5 Identification of microorganisms	34
3.2.5.1 Identification of bacteria	34
3.2.5.2 Identification of moulds	34
3.2.6 Determination of cyanogenic potential	35
3.2.7 Determination of total crude protein	35
3.2.7.1. Preparation of Reagent	35
3.2.7.2 Digestion of sample	36
3.2.7.3 Distillation of digested sample	36
3.2.7.4 Titration of distillate samples	37
3.2.8 Determination of pH	37

3.3 LABORATORY SIMULATION OF CASSAVA HEAP FERMENTATION USING ISOLATED MOULDS	37
3.3.1 Preparation of cassava	37
3.3.2 Preparation of mould spores	38
3.3.3 Fermentation of cassava slices	38
3.3.4 Description of mould growth	39
3.3.5 Texture analysis of cassava roots during fermentation	39
3.3.6 Determination of pH	39
3.4 PROTEIN ENRICHMENT OF CASSAVA BY CO-FERMENTATION WITH COWPEA	40
3.4.1 Preparation of cassava roots and preparation of cowpea	40
3.4.2 Preparation of spores	40
3.4.3 Treatments of batches for fermentation	40
3.4.4 Biochemical analyses	41
3.4.4.1 Determination of ash content	41
3.4.5 Description of mould growth	43
3.4.6 Statistical analysis	43
3.5 EFFECT OF CO-FERMENTATION OF CASSAVA WITH COWPEA ON THE TEXTURE OF CASSAVA ROOTS AND VISCOSITY OF CASSAVA FLOUR PASTE..	43
3.5.1 Preparation of spores	43
3.5.2 Preparation of cassava roots and cowpea	43
3.5.3 Treatments of batches for fermentation	44
3.5.4 Description of mould growth	44
3.5.5 Texture analysis of cassava roots during fermentation	44
3.5.6 Determination of viscosity of cassava flour by “Hagberg Falling Number”	45
3.5.7 Statistical analysis	45
3.6 SENSORY EVALUATION OF PASTE (<i>KARAKATA</i>) PREPARED USING FLOUR FROM CASSAVA ROOTS CO-FERMENTED WITH COWPEA	46
3.6.1 Samples used for sensory evaluation	46
3.6.2 Preparation of cassava flour paste (<i>karakata</i>)	47
3.6.3 Sensory evaluation of <i>karakata</i>	47

3.6.4 Determination of cyanogenic potential	48
3.6.5 Statistical analysis	48
4.0 RESULTS	49
4.1 CYANOGENIC POTENTIAL OF CASSAVA FLOUR COLLECTED FROM SELECTED DISTRICTS OF NAMPULA PROVINCE, MOZAMBIQUE	49
4.1.1 Comparison of processing methods in terms of cyanogenic potential	49
4.1.2 Comparison of the cyanogenic potential of flour samples from four different locations	54
4.2 MICROBIAL AND BIOCHEMICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CASSAVA HEAP FERMENTATION PROCESS	59
4.2.1 Traditional method of heap fermentation in Nampula Province, Mozambique	59
4.2.2 Visual changes, temperature and pH in the heaps	59
4.2.3 Microbial analysis	61
4.2.4 Identification of microorganisms	62
4.2.4.1 <i>Lactic acid bacteria</i>	62
4.2.4.2 <i>Moulds</i>	63
4.2.5 Cyanogenic potential and crude protein content of dry cassava chips	65
4.3 LABORATORY SIMULATION OF CASSAVA HEAP FERMENTATION USING ISOLATED MOULDS	65
4.3.1 Description of mould growth on different pieces of cassava root	65
4.3.2 Determination of cassava softness and pH	67
4.4 PROTEIN ENRICHMENT OF CASSAVA BY CO-FERMENTATION WITH COWPEA	68
4.4.1 Description of mould growth	68
4.4.2 pH	69
4.4.3 Protein content	70
4.4.4 Ash content	73

4.5 EFFECT OF CO-FERMENTATION OF CASSAVA WITH COWPEA ON THE TEXTURE OF CASSAVA ROOTS AND VISCOSITY OF CASSAVA FLOUR PASTE.	75
4.5.1 Growth of <i>Rhizopus stolonifer</i> and <i>Neurospora sitophila</i>	75
4.5.2 Change in softness of cassava roots during fermentation	76
4.5.3 Effect of mould fermentation and cowpea supplementation of cassava roots on the viscosity of cassava flour paste	78
4.6 SENSORY EVALUATION OF PASTE PREPARED USING FLOUR FROM CASSAVA ROOTS CO-FERMENTED WITH COWPEA	81
4.6.1 Evaluation of the acceptability of the appearance of <i>karakata</i> prepared from different cassava flour samples	81
4.6.2 Evaluation of the acceptability of the odour of <i>karakata</i> prepared from different cassava flour samples	83
4.6.3 Evaluation of the acceptability of the taste of <i>karakata</i> prepared from different cassava flour samples	85
4.6.4 Evaluation of the acceptability of the texture of <i>karakata</i> prepared from different cassava flour samples	88
4.6.5 Cyanogenic potential	90
5.0 DISCUSSION	92
5.1 CYANOGENIC POTENTIAL OF CASSAVA FLOUR COLLECTED FROM SELECTED DISTRICTS OF NAMPULA PROVINCE, MOZAMBIQUE	92
5.2 MICROBIAL AND BIOCHEMICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CASSAVA HEAP FERMENTATION PROCESS	94
5.3 LABORATORY SIMULATION OF CASSAVA HEAP FERMENTATION USING ISOLATED MOULDS	96
5.4 PROTEIN ENRICHMENT OF CASSAVA BY CO-FERMENTATION WITH COWPEA	97

5.4.1 Growth of <i>R. stolonifer</i> and pH changes	97
5.4.2 Protein and ash content	98
5.5 EFFECT OF CO-FERMENTATION OF CASSAVA WITH COWPEA ON THE TEXTURE OF CASSAVA ROOTS AND VISCOSITY OF CASSAVA FLOUR PASTE	99
5.5.1 Growth of <i>Rhizopus stolonifer</i> and <i>Neurospora sitophila</i> and softness of the roots	99
5.5.2 Viscosity of cassava flour paste	100
5.6 SENSORY EVALUATION OF PASTE (<i>KARAKATA</i>) PREPARED FROM CO- FERMENTED OF CASSAVA ROOTS WITH COWPEA	100
5.6.1 Appearance of <i>karakata</i>	100
5.6.2 Odour, Taste and Texture of <i>karakata</i>	101
5.6.3 Cyanogenic potential	102
6.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	102
7.0 REFERENCES	104

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 2.1 Chemical composition of cassava roots and leaves	8
Table 2.2 Comparison of FAO protein amino acid patterns with amino-acid composition of protein of cassava and other foods.	10
Table 2.3 Expected amino acid balance when cassava:cowpea are mixed in proportion 96:4 g/g compared with cassava and cowpea alone	24
Table 2.4 Expected amino acid balance when cassava:cowpea are mixed in proportion 92:8 g/g compared with cassava and cowpea alone	25
Table 2.5 Expected amino acid balance when cassava:cowpea are mixed in proportion 88:12 g/g compared with cassava and cowpea alone	26
Table 3.1 A table showing assigned scores for various sensory attributes of <i>karakata</i>	47
Table 4.1 Cyanogen contents of cassava flour from different districts classified according to processing method	50
Table 4.2 Table of pH, total mesophilic bacteria and lactic acid bacteria counts in fermented cassava roots, and cyanogenic potential and crude protein in dried fermented cassava chips after different periods of fermentation	62
Table 4.3 Summary of the characteristics of bacteria isolated from heap fermented cassava	63
Table 4.4 Summary of the characteristics of moulds isolated from heap fermented cassava roots	64
Table 4.5 Mould growth on different slices of cassava roots during fermentation at 30° C	66
Table 4.6 Texture of different slices of unfermented and fermented cassava roots	67
Table 4.7 pH changes during the fermentation of batches of cassava at 30 °C	68
Table 4.8 Growth of <i>Rhizopus stolonifer</i> during fermentation of cassava and cassava + cowpea at 30° C	69
Table 4.9 pH changes during the fermentation of batches of cassava and cassava + cowpea at 30 °C	70
Table 4.10 Total ash content of unfermented and fermented cassava flour prepared from cassava and cassava + cowpea	74
Table 4.11 Growth of <i>Rhizopus stolonifer</i> (CNF6) and <i>Neurospora sitophila</i> (CNF7) during fermentation of cassava roots either supplemented with cowpea or not at 30° C	76
Table 4.12 Identification of flavour of <i>karakata</i> by the panellist	87

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 2.1 Cross section of a cassava storage root	6
Figure 2.2 The generalized biosynthetic pathway for cyanogenic glucosides as proposed by Hahlbrock <i>et al.</i> (1968)	12
Figure 2.3 Hydrolysis of linamarin	13
Figure 2.4 Metabolism of cyanide to thiocyanate in the human body	15
Figure 3.1 Map of Nampula Province, Mozambique	28
Figure 3.2 Sequence of experimental production of fermented cassava flour supplemented with cowpea.	42
Figure 4.1. Distribution of the cyanogenic potentials of all samples of cassava flour	51
Figure 4.2 Distribution of the cyanogenic potentials of samples of cassava flour processed by a combination of fermentation followed by sun-drying	52
Figure 4.3 Distribution of cyanogenic potentials of samples of cassava flour processed by sun-drying alone.....	53
Figure 4.4 Distribution of the cyanogenic potentials of cassava flour samples from Acordo de Lusaka, Memba District.	55
Figure 4.5 Distribution of the cyanogenic potentials of cassava flour samples from Niyaro village, Monapo District. ...	56
Figure 4.6 Distribution of the cyanogenic potentials of cassava flour samples from Quixaxe village, Mogincual District.	57
Figure 4.7 Distribution of the cyanogenic potentials of cassava flour samples from Naconha village , Mogovolas District.	58
Figure 4.8 Temperatures inside and outside the heaps during traditional fermentation, measured in the morning	60
Figure 4.9 Temperatures inside and outside the heaps during traditional fermentation, measured in the afternoon.....	61
Figure 4.10 Changes in protein content during fermentation of cassava roots inoculated with <i>Rhizopus stolonifer</i>	71
Figure 4.11 Changes in protein content during fermentation of cassava roots uninoculated	72
Figure 4.12 Protein contents of cassava flour supplemented with different quantities of cowpea flour	73
Figure 4.13 Hardness of cassava roots during fermentation with <i>Rhizopus stolonifer</i> and <i>Neurospora sitophila</i>	78

Figure 4.14 Change in viscosity of cassava during fermentation with <i>Rhizopus stolonifer</i> and <i>Neurospora sitophila</i>	80
Figure 4.15 General appearance acceptability scores of <i>karakata</i> prepared from different cassava flours	82
Figure 4.16 General odour acceptability scores of <i>karakata</i> prepared from different cassava flours.	84
Figure 4.17 General taste acceptability scores of <i>karakata</i> prepared from different cassava flours	86
Figure 4.18 General texture acceptability scores of <i>karakata</i> prepared from different cassava flours	89
Figure 4.19 Cyanogenic potential of different cassava flours.	91