

# Package 107, Item 2

Type: Script

October 2017

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# How growing okra serves women in Bakay Wèrè

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### Notes to broadcaster

In the 1930s, French settlers created a farming area in the Office du Niger, in central Mali. This area was used to grow cotton and sugar cane just after Mali achieved independence in 1960. Thousands of farming families in this area have been growing rice for three decades. But now, most women think that growing onions and okra off-season after the rice harvest is one of the best ways to be self-sufficient and support their families.

Income from selling okra helps thousands of farming households to invest in livestock and poultry production, as well as property. That is why more and more people grow okra. Growing and marketing okra in Mali and abroad is relatively problem-free, which contributes to its popularity.

In this script, we meet Fanta Bouaré, who farms in the village of Bakay Wèrè, and grows okra off-season. She is a member of a women’s group which grows okra and sells it at a weekly local market, and also supplies wholesale traders who come from Bamako. These sales enable them to save money for their needs and support their families during difficult times of the year. Unlike other vegetables, farmers can store okra as long as they want, and wait for the desired price.

We also meet Ousmane Touré, a wholesale okra trader. He and his colleagues visit the farm to talk to farmers about selling okra. He sells the okra he buys from women farmers in Bakay Wèrè to vegetable retailers, who export it to African restaurants in Europe and the USA. Ousmane tells us about the benefits of selling okra and how it is stored before it is sent out of the country.

You could use this script as inspiration to research and write a script on growing okra or a similar topic in your area. Or you might choose to produce this script on your station, using voice actors to represent the speakers. If so, please make sure to tell your audience at the beginning of the program that the voices are those of actors, not the original people involved in the interviews.

If you choose to use this script as inspiration for creating your own program, you could talk to farmers who grow okra in your area and the experts who advise them. You might ask them:

Is there a market for growing okra in this area? Can farmers make a good living selling okra?

**HOST:** Hello, dear listeners. Today, we’re going to meet okra growers from Bakay Wèrè village, in the Office du Niger zone of Mali. We will learn how okra production and the okra market are progressing, and what benefits farmers can enjoy by growing this vegetable.

What kinds of production and marketing difficulties should a prospective okra grower know about?

How can okra farmers address these difficulties?

Estimated running time for the script: 20 minutes, with intro and outro music

Bakay Wèrè is a village in Niono cercle, in central Mali, 350 kilometres from Bamako, the capital city. Here, the main okra growers are women. By growing okra, which is cultivated by all families in the region, they manage to be self-reliant and not dependent on their husbands’ income. They can even help out their husbands and children.

We are in a large okra field that spreads over about six hectares. I can hear small birds and insects all around. About a dozen women are here, each busy with their own work. Some have kids on their backs. We’re going to talk to a woman who doesn’t seem very busy.

**HOST:** Hello, madam. Could you please introduce yourself to our listeners?

**FANTA:** My name is Fanta Bouaré. I am a farmer in Bakay Wèrè, in the Mariko *commune*, in Niono cercle.

**HOST:** We are producing a show about okra farming during the off-season, that is, grown before or after the rainy season. I’d like you to tell us a bit about off-season okra production. How does that work?

**FANTA:** Well, off-season okra farming is usually done by us women; men are not very interested. That’s because they grow something else: rice. But we grow okra every year to meet our own needs. Okra likes heat and grows quickly when temperatures are high, from 20 to 34oC. Okra grows very slowly when temperatures are low. This is why it is not recommended to grow okra in the cold dry season in Mali. Apart from temperature, the growth depends on the available moisture, light, ventilation, and soil minerals.

We start by planting seeds right after the rice harvest because we use the same fields. Okra can germinate on any kind of soil, but it grows well on deep sandy and silty soils with a pH between 6 and 8, and rich in well-decayed organic matter like manure or compost.

The timing for harvesting okra depends on the variety. The period from the sowing till harvest varies between 45 and 70 days.

In that regard, different people have different tastes. Some choose varieties that can be harvested after only two months, and others choose varieties with cycles up to four months. Anyway, both choices will give good results, and everyone wins, whatever choice they make.

**HOST:** We can see many women working here. Do they meet up to work like this every day?

**FANTA:** (LAUGHTER) No, today is a special day, so everyone is here. Tomorrow, Saturday, is the Molodo Bamana Fair. All the neighbouring villages will gather there for the weekly market. We will go there to sell our produce and make our weekly purchases for cooking, and to buy other small things which we might need during the week.

But our okra is not quite ripe; it needs a few more days. It’s rare to find ripe okra at this time of the season. So, today we’re harvesting just a few ripe vegetables to take to the market tomorrow. I think that other women are here to water their plants.

**HOST:** Okay. Before talking about the benefits, tell us a bit about how okra is grown.

**FANTA:** Well, in order to grow okra, you must first make sure that your field is fertile, or you must be able to afford a lot of fertilizer. When you prepare the soil, you should use fertilizers with sufficient organic matter and minerals. You can add NPK, or a 10-10-20 or 15-15-15 fertilizer at 2-4 kilograms every 100 square metres. A plot which is ten metres long by ten metres wide is 100 square metres. I say this because our soil here gets depleted every year, so you really need fertilizers. We use oxen to do the plowing, just like we do for rice fields, and then we sow a maximum of three seeds in each tiny hole. So 2-3 seeds per hole after ploughing and adding fertilizer, or on ridges. You need 4-5 kilograms of seeds for one hectare. Soak the seeds in water the day before sowing. About three weeks after sowing, thin to 1-2 plants per hole when they are 10-15 centimeters high. Okra doesn’t like a lot of water, so we water a little every two days. After three or four days, there are small shoots—that’s when the real work begins.

The rats who live in the rice fields bother us a lot. They eat the leaves from the small shoots, which totally destroys okra fields. So we use poison to fight the rats. We mix it with a certain amount of rice or maize grain, their favorite food, and then we spread small amounts here and there at the foot of the shoots. That’s what kills them.

As soon as we are free from rats, we apply fertilizer; some growers use animal manure. Add 50 kilograms of urea per hectare and 100 kilograms of NPK fertilizer per hectare three weeks after sowing, then bury 50 kilograms of urea 15 days following the first supply.

After that, all that is left to do is monitoring, which includes continuing to water regularly to keep the soil wet, weeding, and treating insect pests. Harvest starts 45 to 75 days after sowing and consists in picking young fruits which are still immature.) Harvest every two or three days to prevent fruits from becoming woody. The harvest can be drawn out to 55-110 days. Yields vary between 10 and 15 tonnes per hectare in the dry season.

**HOST:** I heard that one of the main problems of farmers in this area is that their farm produce doesn’t sell well and they have no way to store it. Because of that, many crops suffer, and people gradually stop growing them. Does this happen for okra?

**FANTA:** What you say is absolutely true for crops such as tomato, cucumber, pepper, eggplant, and even onion and potato. But not for okra. Okra can be used fresh or dried. Fresh okra can be used three days following the harvest. Beyond this period, you can keep it in the fridge for five to seven days. Freezing allows longer storage.

That’s another advantage of growing okra: it’s a vegetable that is as good when it’s dried as when it’s fresh. Drying sliced or whole small fruits in the sun or on a solar stove ensures very good storage.

There’s no problem with processing or storage. We take our harvest to the market, and, if we can’t sell it all, we cut the leftovers into pieces and dry them in the sun. Once this is done, we can store okra for as long as we want.

Some women even prefer dry okra to fresh okra. Every day after picking, they dry okra slowly in the sun, throughout the harvesting period. They store them for a few months, until the rainy season starts. That’s when the price goes up and we can make a lot of money from selling just a little. One kilogram of okra sells for 500 CFA francs during the harvest period, but 750 during the lean season.

**HOST:** Okay. What are the benefits of growing off-season okra?

**FANTA:** As I told you earlier, for us women in Bakay Wèrè, after rice, we can’t see a more important crop than okra. We are convinced that, all in all, okra is the best farm product. It’s a product that has proven its worth. Other crops decompose rapidly. Even onion, which everyone grows, has its limits regarding storage, especially when you use a lot of fertilizers. After only three months, everything will be rotten.

But okra doesn’t need all that. When it’s fresh, you can keep it for a few days. Otherwise, you can cut it into small pieces, dry it, and store it for over a year if you so wish.

As regards selling, whenever you think that the price per kilogram is right, you make your sale. With other products, it’s absolutely impossible to have this kind of control on production and marketing.

Coming back to concrete benefits, many women in our group have accomplished great things thanks to okra. Some have increased the number of livestock they own; some helped their husbands pay off debts; some even bought plots in Niono. Thanks to okra, they managed to finance their daughters’ marriage. We could go on and on about everything you can imagine as expenses: we can cover them, thanks to okra.

SOUND OF water being poured onto a bed of okra

**HOST:** Do you have anything to say to other okra growers and to those who may still be hesitating to jump into the adventure of growing okra?

**Fanta:** The message is plain and simple. To those who are already growing okra, I can only say “Bravo.” I wish them the best because they’ve already understood that okra is the solution to our problems. It was only after spending many years suffering growing tomatoes that we drew this conclusion. We always ended up throwing our tomatoes into the canal, because of the lack of processing and storage infrastructure.

For those who are hesitating, I think it is time to stop hesitating and invest in okra farming. We have suffered a lot growing other fruits and vegetables that cannot be stored for long in our climate.

**HOST:** Ms. Fanta, thanks a million for taking the time to talk to us. We’ll move on and talk to other people to learn about other aspects of okra.

Dear listeners, two traders, a man and a woman, just walked into the field. We’ll chat with them to learn more about how the okra market works. Ma’am, Sir, hello!

**Ousmane Touré:** Hello.

**HOST:** Today, we’re producing a show about off-season okra farming. Because you’re here, we assumed that you must know about this topic. Could you give us a few minutes of your time, and start by introducing yourself to our listeners?

**Ousmane Touré:** It would be my pleasure. My name is Ousmane Touré, and I am a wholesale fruit merchant in the Woninda market, in the Bozola district of Bamako. In order to be a wholesale merchant, one has either to be a producer or to deal with producers. We do not farm ourselves, but we are with farmers all the time. That’s why we come all the way to the field to bargain for products.

**HOST:** Today, we’re interested in okra. As a merchant, could you tell us a bit about the market for this vegetable?

**Ousmane Touré:**  I’ll start by saying that for us and for consumers, okra is very different from other vegetables. It’s almost the only vegetable whose marketing is risk-free. After being harvested, it can stay a few days without going bad, and if you can afford to keep it refrigerated, it will last even longer. Marketing is problem-free.

Off-season harvesting will start soon, in 15 days at the most, so from now on we’ll be here every Friday with a van that will be parked next to Molodo market.

In order to make more profit, we come to the farmers’ fields and buy what we want. Then we carry the produce to the van, using carts that we rent here in Bakay Wèrè. We have appointments every Sunday morning with our buyers in different parts of Bamako. Overall, the okra market presents no problem for now.

**HOST:** Who are your buyers—retailers or consumers?

**Ousmane Touré:** We are wholesalers and our main buyers are retailers who sell products in the different markets in Bamako. On rare occasions, we do retail, but it’s only in special circumstances.

We also have buyers in several other countries in the world, and they provide the larger market. They own Malian restaurants in Europe and in the USA. I personally own two Malian restaurants in Paris, two in the city of Montreuil, in France, and I also send products to two Senegalese restaurants in New York. I also know a woman in Milan, Italy who only buys dried okra or okra powder. I know other wholesalers who have buyers in Italy and in Germany.

**HOST:** Does exporting to these kinds of destinations mean that the okra needs to be treated differently so that it arrives in good condition? How do you deal with that?

**Ousmane Touré:** It’s not complicated at all. The buyers place their orders and specify a deadline for delivery. For instance, I’m getting a call now saying that someone will arrive in Mali on a given date and will leave on a given date, and asking me to do everything I can to get the buyers a few hundred kilograms of fresh okra. Sometimes they take up to two tonnes.

Once the order is placed, it’s up to me to fight to get the amount requested and have it delivered to the airport at least a day before the buyer leaves. For such orders, we don’t use plastic sacks, but jars that the villagers make with palm leaves. I buy fifty or more of those, fill them up, and close them with pieces of cardboard.

Then I store them in the refrigerated truck that I bring here to the field. In Bamako, we have fridges that we rent to store products for a few days. One day or half a day before the buyer’s departure, I bring the fridges to the airport. That’s it for me; the buyer takes care of the rest. It’s a lot of expense, but the buyers finance the whole thing, and we earn more in such transactions than in the markets in Bamako.

**HOST:** Our show is coming to an end, but can you tell us if you find all that you need in this field?

**Ousmane Touré:** Oh no, not at all. This field cannot cover our needs for okra. We deal with many other okra farmers in other villages. For the past few years, we have been working with other merchants as a group, and we have identified about twenty farmers who are very serious about their work and who are able to produce enough to meet our demand.

Fanta, the woman you just interviewed, is part of our farmers’ group. Supplying our merchants group has become a priority for these farmers. When the harvest starts, as long as we need okra, no other merchant has a right to buy any from them. We have had this agreement for five years now with the farmers, and it applies to all okra harvests, in-season and off-season.

**HOST:** Thank you very much, Mr. Touré.

Dear listeners, this is the end of our show. Today, with our two guests, we have learnt that okra farmers in Bakay Wèrè village get good harvests and sell their production with no worries.

We also learned that okra has many advantages over other vegetables. It is resistant to heat and can be stored for a long time after drying in the sun. This helps women farmers choose a good time to market their okra, when they can take advantage of higher prices in the market. We have also learned that the okra grown in Mali is consumed in other continents, which shows how important this vegetable is in Malian eating habits.

Thank you for listening to our show. We invite you to tune in for our next show during which we will discuss another important theme.

Thank you for your kind attention and see you very soon!

## Acknowledgments

Contributed by: Boubacar Gakou, film maker and producer, Bamako, Mali

Reviewed by: Mamadou Togola, Agronomist in charge of monitoring and evaluation, Office of the Irrigated Perimeter of Baguinéda, Ministry of Agriculture, Mali

**Information sources:**

Interviews:

Fanta Bouaré, April 17, 2017

Ousmane Touré, April 17, 2017

*This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from Save the Children and with financial support from USAID Technical and Operational Perfromance Support (TOPS).*

 Project undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada