

By: Sachin 2008, Science Editor

Sausages Growing in the Trees

The African Kigelia

You may have heard about breadfruit trees. This is the sausage tree, to complete the hot dog. When thinking about the trees of the African savanna, baobabs, acacias and eventually mopane trees come into your mind. But one of the most original trees of the African savanna is the Sausage Tree (*Kigelia africana*), a tree found throughout tropical Africa from Senegal to Eritrea and Chad, and southwards to northern South Africa and Namibia. The tree is not very tall, reaching a maximum height of 20m (66ft). By far, a *Kigelia* tree looks like an enormous green shop window, with the diameter of 20-30m (66-100ft), where sausages that are 30-100cm (1-3.3ft) long and 18cm (0.5ft) wide, weighing 3-10kg (7-22 pounds) hang on ropes. These "sausages" are just the fruit of the tree. They grow starting with dark waxy trumpet-shaped flowers that are pollinated by bats and some birds. The fallen corollas of these flowers make a delicacy for the African buffaloes (*Syncerus caffer*). Instead, the shade of the dense canopy of the sausage tree, that protects of drought the nearby vegetation, attracts lions, antelopes and monkeys. The most devoted consumers of *Kigelia* leaves and ripe "sausages" are the giraffes and Greater Kudu (a large antelope). The fallen fruit are sought by hippopotamuses, elephants, bush pigs, porcupines and some antelopes. Baboons too enjoy these fruit. All these mammals disperse the seeds of the Sausage Tree in their dung. The seeds are consumed by African Brown Parrots and Brown-headed Parrots, but also by cockatoos in Australia, where this tree is an exotic ornamental species. In Africa, shamans use the tree sausage against rheumatism, snakebites, evil spirits, syphilis, and even tornadoes. A light alcoholic drink is made from the fruit, but like in the case of manioc, the fresh product is poisonous, and must be dried, roasted or fermented. *Kigelia* is widely planted as ornamental tree in tropical areas outside Africa. One issue, though: the falling fruit can severely harm people or damage vehicles.