

**Jamaica Journal** is published on behalf of the Institute of Jamaica  
12-16 East Street, Kingston, Jamaica  
by Institute of Jamaica Publications Ltd.

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**Back issues:** Most back issues are available. List sent on request. Entire series available on microfilm from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106, U.S.A.

**Subscriptions:** J\$50 for four issues (in Jamaica only); U.S.\$15, U.K. £10.

**Retail single copy price:** J\$15 (in Jamaica only); overseas U.S. \$5 or U.K. £3 post paid surface mail.

**Advertising:** Rates sent on request.

**Index:** Articles appearing in **Jamaica Journal** are abstracted and indexed in **Historical Abstracts** and **America: History and Life**.

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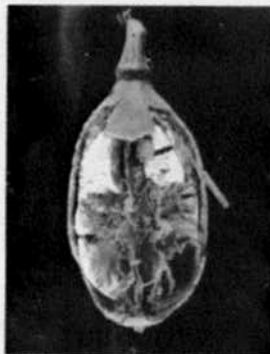
**ISSN: 0021-4124**

# JAMAICA JOURNAL

QUARTERLY OF THE INSTITUTE OF JAMAICA

Vol. 20 No. 2

May – July 1987



Deryck Roberts

**COVER:** Composite photo symbolising our special feature on death rituals and responses. The monument in the Spanish Town Cathedral is to the Earl of Effingham and his wife Catherine who died within three weeks of each other while the Earl was Governor of Jamaica. The marble monument by John Bacon, R.A. followed his success with the Rodney Memorial (see inside back cover). The Effingham monument incorporates classical funeral motifs, symbols of the governor's office (mace, scale and purse) and specifically Jamaican motifs such as the alligator symbol on the woman's belt and the Jamaican coat of arms.

## History and Life

**Special Feature** Death: Some Rituals and Responses

- 12 **Western Responses to Death in a Jamaican Context**  
by Elizabeth Pigou
- 17 **Tombstones in the Jewish Cemetery and What They Tell**  
by Betty Bailey
- 23 **A Note on Afro-Jamaican Beliefs and Rituals**  
by Elizabeth Pigou
- 27 **Dinki Mini**  
by Laura Tanna with interviews by Hazel Ramsay
- 34 **A Century of Murder in Jamaica 1880-1980**  
by Michele Johnson

## Science

- 2 **The Search for Africa's Baobab Tree in Jamaica**  
by John Rashford

## The Arts

- 32 **Poems: The Old Cotton Trees are Dying**  
**Hill People**  
**Awakening**  
by Earl McKenzie

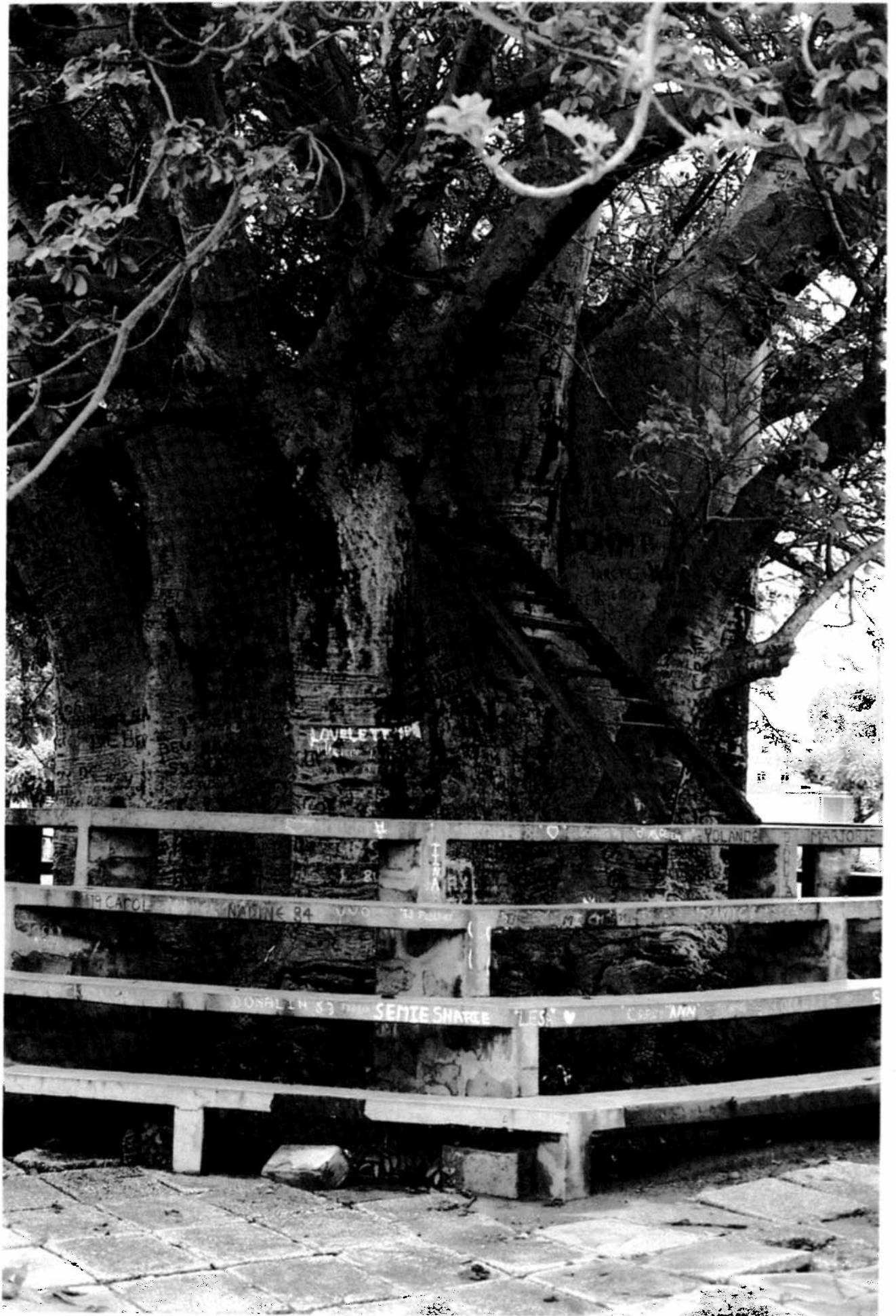
## Regular Features

- 55 **Art: Christopher Gonzalez**  
by Gloria Escoffery
- 43 **Music: From Field to Platform: Jamaican Folk Music in Concert . . . . 2**  
by Pamela O'Gorman
- 51 **Books and Writers**  
**Reviews:** Richardson Wright's **Revels in Jamaica 1682-1838**  
by Noel Vaz  
James Miller's **Koori**  
by Alan Eyre

## Literary Magazines

## Briefly Noted

- 49 **Notes on Contributors**



LOVELETT 194

19 CAROL

WAGNER 84

VVO 83 Puffer

YOLANDE

DONALD 83

SENTE SHARPE

LESS

CAROL ANN

# The Search for Africa's Baobab Tree in Jamaica

Text and illustrations by John Rashford

Of the many plants introduced into Jamaica none is more intriguing than Africa's spectacular baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*). We can see from the illustrations that this is an enormous and unusual tree. African legend tells us that the baobab's strange appearance results from the fact that it was planted upside-down when the world was created. This refers to its stumpy, irregularly shaped branches which resemble roots thrusting into the air. Its distinctly odd appearance makes the baobab an easily recognised feature of the landscape wherever it grows and has earned it various descriptive epithets such as 'ludicrous', 'monstrous', 'grotesque' and 'ugly', 'spooky' and 'unnatural'.

This article presents photographic illustrations of the four baobab trees whose existence I have been able to verify and it summarizes the little information that is available on the history of this species in Jamaica.<sup>1</sup>

## Description

Although there is significant individual variation, baobabs can, in general, be described as large trees that grow up to sixty feet tall with one or more enormous bulging trunks that seem way out of proportion to the height and spread of the tree. The trunk is usually topped by thick, rapidly tapering branches that, in the drier parts of Africa, are often leafless for a good part of the year.

In the Caribbean, leaves are usually shed during the winter dry season and new leaves appear in the spring and early summer and last through the fall. The baobab has alternate compound leaves, each composed of a long leaf stalk with three to seven oval-shaped leaflets radiating from the top like fingers from the hand. The leaflets which are usually five in number vary in size with the earliest being the smallest and the terminal leaflet being the largest.

The growth of new leaves in the spring and early summer is followed by flower buds on very long stalks that bloom in June and July. In some cases the large white or creamy 'upside-down' flowers (which are about six inches across and look like those of the hibiscus) appear as early as May and trees in the Caribbean can be seen blooming as late as November.

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*The finest example of the baobab located in Jamaica so far – the tree at the Convent of Mercy Academy (Alpha) girls' school (above); the imposing trunk at left gives some idea of its tremendous girth.*



From these flowers develop large, woody, gourd-like pods that are oblong in shape and covered by a furry velvet-like coat. Each fruit contains some thirty or more brown, kidney-shaped seeds embedded in a white or creamy acidic pulp laced together in a mass of tough, stringy fibres. These fruits mature through the summer and autumn and they ripen and fall from the tree in the winter, spring and early summer.<sup>2</sup>

## Distribution

The baobab is a native of the hot, dry savannahs of tropical Africa. It is often described as the 'best known' or 'the most prominent' member of the genus *Adansonia* of which there are some nine related species that are only known to occur naturally on the island of Madagascar and in Australia. Human fascination with the baobab has resulted in the spread of this species throughout the tropical regions of the world where it can now be found growing on public and private grounds, along roadsides and walkways, and in home gardens, botanic gardens, nurseries, and parks.

In the literature the baobab is described as 'rare' in the Caribbean but it is far more common than is generally recognized. It is known to exist in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, St. Thomas and St. Croix (U.S. Virgin Islands), Antigua, St. Kitts, Nevis, Dominica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Vincent, and the Dutch islands of Curacao and St. Eustatius.

Jamaica is fortunate to have received the attention of what Asprey and Thornton [1953 p.363] refer to as a 'long list of distinguished botanists' and as they rightly point out, 'the island was one of the earliest and best botanized areas in

the Caribbean.' When we examine this literature we find that Sloane [1696, 1707-25], Barham [1794], Browne [1756], and Long [1774] who were among the leading figures in initial studies of the island's natural history, do not mention the existence of the baobab in Jamaica. One of the earliest references appears in Bryan Edwards's *History Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies* [1796]. In chapter four, Edwards describes the relief, climate, rivers, springs, soils, ores, forests, and crops of Jamaica and at the end of his discussion he writes:

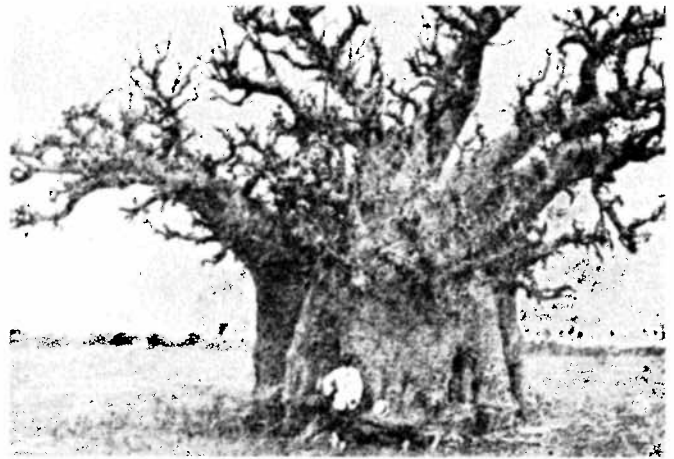
I shall conclude this chapter, with an authentic catalogue of the foreign plants in the public botanical garden of this island; lamenting, at the same time, that I am not able to gratify the reader with a more copious and extensive display, from the magnificent orchard of my late friend Hinton East, Esquire, who had promised to favour me with an *Hortus Eastensis*, to be prepared for this work; — but much greater room have I to lament the cause of my disappointment, and mourn over the severity of that fate which suddenly snatched a most amiable and excellent citizen from his friends and the public, and hurried him to an untimely grave. — Such is the vanity of hope, and the uncertainty of life!

The catalogue indicates that the baobab was among the trees to be found growing in Hinton East's garden at the time of his death in 1792.

East was an Oxford-educated Jamaican from an established creole family who returned to the island toward the end of the eighteenth century to practice law. He was an influential man from the 1770s until his death in 1792 and is generally recognised as one of the most important figures in the early history of plant introduction to the island. East was a planter who found ample time to be of public service as receiver general, registrar in the court of the vice-admiralty, public treasurer and an influential member of the colony's ruling political body, the house of assembly. Eyre [1966 p.16] notes that 'Jamaica's present appearance probably owes more to Hinton East than to anyone else' and Webster [1965 p.4] describes East as the 'benefactor of all Caribbean gardeners'. The catalogue of plants growing in East's garden which Bryan Edwards published was prepared by Doctor Broughton whom Edwards [p.189] described as 'a very eminent and learned physician and botanist'. If the baobab tree or trees which Broughton saw in East's garden in 1793 were planted between 1770 and 1792, they would be approximately 195 to 217 years old today and would have attained a size that would make them easily recognisable features of the environment. I have explored the general area where Hinton East's garden was located [see Powell 1972] and there is no indication that the baobab tree or trees mentioned by Broughton have survived.

Another reference to baobab in Jamaica is in Lunan's *Hortus Jamaicensis* (1814). Lunan was also a Jamaican planter and his book was largely a compilation of earlier sources with little original information. Apart from noting the existence of the tree, Lunan tells us is that it was introduced by Hinton East. We learn nothing from him about the distribution and history of this species in Jamaica.

Twenty-one years after Lunan's book, Macfayden — a medical doctor — published his study of the island's flora and he too makes reference to the existence of the baobab in Jamaica. He notes only that it was 'introduced' and that it 'may be frequently met with'. Macfayden's comments suggest that the baobab was fairly common. Unfortunately, he



*Baobab trees are remarkable for the great age and girth that they attain and for their unusual appearance which is due, says the legend, to the fact that they were planted upside-down when the world was created. This ancient specimen in Sri Lanka shows the typical shape of the tree.*

does not provide us with the location of individual specimens, and it is difficult to believe that the tree was as widespread as he suggests.

Another indication of baobab in Jamaica appears in the 1883 *Annual Report of the Public Gardens and Plantations*. In discussing the cultivation and distribution of economic plants, Morris who was then director of public gardens and plantations reports that 'A few specimens of this tree (somewhat resembling the cotton tree) are found in the island; where, as near Constant Spring (St. Andrew), they attain a large size and well deserve the name of "gouty stem" trees.' I have made several unsuccessful attempts to locate the tree 'near Constant Spring' and I suspect that if it did exist, it has not survived. Unlike Macfayden, Morris notes that there were only a 'few specimens' in Jamaica, and it is unfortunate that the only location he provided was that of a tree 'near Constant Spring'.

One of the most interesting references appears in the September 1887 *Bulletin* of the botanical department which presented a list of 'fruits' grown in the botanic gardens and offered for sale. On the list was the baobab, whose seedlings were being sold for three pennies each.

In 1900, Edwin Atkins of Boston established a garden in Cuba on his plantation at Soledad, near Cienfuegas. Hubbard's 1932 study of the garden indicates that the baobab was among the plants there. What is especially interesting is that these trees came from seeds sent from Jamaica. Hubbard indicates that this took place on three occasions. In 1907 seeds were sent by a D. Houghes and in 1908 by both Houghes and one R. Cameron. It is interesting to note that in 1887 baobab seedlings were being grown for sale in Jamaica and for shipment to Cuba and elsewhere and that although they continue to thrive in the garden at Soledad (and perhaps elsewhere) not a single specimen is to be found in any of Jamaica's botanic gardens today.

Another indication of the existence of baobab trees in Jamaica appeared in an article titled "Notes on Fruits in Jamaica", published by William Harris, then superintendent of botanical gardens, in the 1912 *Bulletin* of the Department of Agriculture. The purpose of Harris's article was 'merely to give some idea' of the kinds of fruits that are to be found in Jamaica and in it he mentions the baobab. He offers a brief comment on the tree's origin, size, longevity and fruit, but



tells us nothing about its distribution and history in Jamaica.

Adams [1972] also notes the existence of the baobab in his authoritative study of the flowering plants of the island, but gives no location except that they are 'occasional in gardens' [p.49].

### The Baobabs Discovered

Having looked at various references to baobabs in Jamaica, I would now like to show how my interest developed, and to indicate the ways in which I have come to learn about the trees that were found.

In 1983 I became interested in the cultural importance of the cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) to the people of the Caribbean. While researching this topic in Antigua, I was directed to what was said to be a fine example of a cotton tree which turned out instead to be a baobab. I was surprised. My earliest encounter with baobab trees was during my studies in East Africa, and this was the first time I had seen one in the New World. After a close inspection of the tree and several photographs, I continued my study of cotton trees. I did not think of the tree again until I came across additional specimens in St. Kitts and several on St. Croix.

The discovery of these trees convinced me that this was a topic worth exploring. I began a study of the baobab in the Caribbean only to discover that we really know very little about the history of this species in the region; this was especially true of Jamaica. To learn more about the baobab in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean, I began a study of the botanical literature and I also wrote to individuals who are recognized for their knowledge of Caribbean flora. Among them was Dr. George Proctor who was botanist and head of the Natural History Division, Institute of Jamaica, for many years.

I wrote to Dr. Proctor in December 1985 and received a response indicating the location of two trees that he knew of and one about which he was uncertain. All were in Kingston. 'One of these', he wrote, 'is fairly conspicuous, just across the gully from Old Hope Road just below the intersection of Wellington Drive' and he went on to note that 'the owner of this tree (if still the same person) knows its identity and is quite protective'. The second tree he described as 'just west of Hopefield Avenue, about 150 yards or so south of the junction with Hope Road'. He also suggested that there might be a tree at Kings House or Hope Gardens though he had not seen it.

In May and June 1986, I went in search of Jamaica's baobab trees in the midst of the worst floods the island had seen in recent years. The tree growing on the side of the Mountain View Gully at the intersection of Old Hope Road and Munroe Road (which becomes Wellington Drive) was not difficult to locate as it is easy to see as one drives by. It is a very beautiful tree and about thirty to thirty-five feet in height.<sup>3</sup> I would estimate it to be fifty or sixty years old. The tree divides at its base to form two main trunks; measured four feet from the ground, one is seven feet five and one-half inches in circumference and the other is seven feet. When I first saw the tree at the end of May 1986, it was full of mature leaves which probably appeared in March or April. There were six fully developed fruits on the tree from the 1986 winter-spring crop and there were many under the tree. There were also many young flower buds on the tree.

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*The tree at Alpha boys' school.*

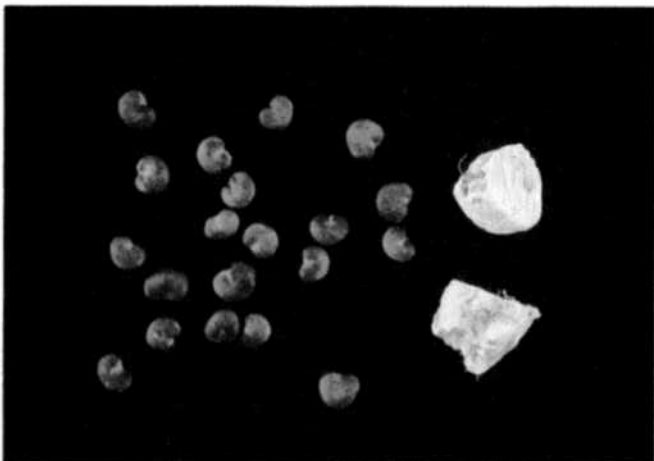
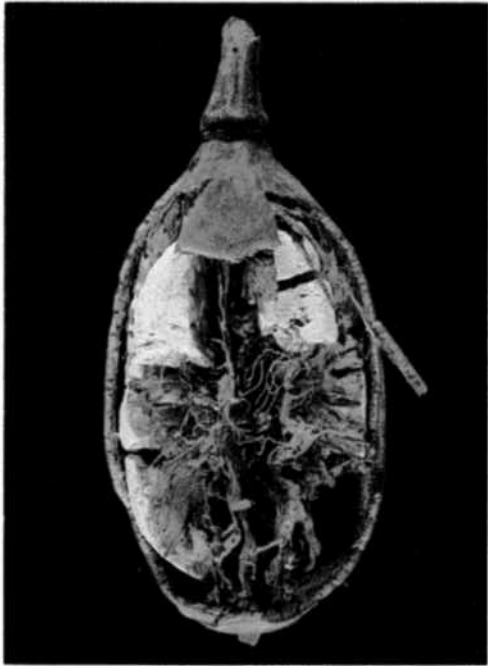
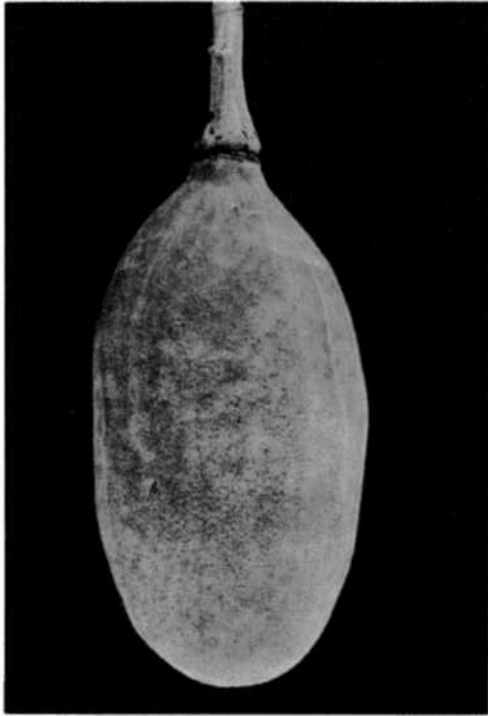


*Baobab at Hopefield Avenue in Kingston.*



*Details of the baobab: Above: close-up of leaves, flower buds and both fresh and dried flowers; right, top to bottom: whole fruit, section of fruit and pulp and seeds.*

*Baobab tree at the corner of Munroe Road and Old Hope Road in Kingston.*



On 5 June 1986, I spoke to Gerald Wight the 'protective owner' described by Proctor. Wight said he had bought the land with the tree on it. Twenty-one years ago when construction was taking place on the Mountain View Gully, he noticed a man who had stopped his car and was talking to the construction crew. He went to see what was happening and learned that the man was George Proctor and that he was asking the men not to 'push the tree down' or 'damage it', and telling them 'that this African tree was the only one of its kind in Jamaica'. It is clear that Dr. Proctor knew of this tree for twenty-three years or more because in 1964 and 1966 he prepared herbarium specimens for the Institute of Jamaica.

The second tree I went in search of was the one on Hopefield Avenue. My first two attempts to locate it were unsuccessful but it was finally found by a friend to be growing along the driveway at 39 Hopefield Avenue. I saw this tree on 6 June 1986 and was surprised to see it covered with old man's beard (*Tillandsia usneoides*). Its tall (and for a baobab) relatively slender grey trunk was over forty-five feet in height, with a circumference of twelve feet one inch measured at four feet from the ground. Like the Munroe Road tree it also had new leaves that were fully developed. There were four mature fruits on the tree from the 1986 winter crop and this tree too was full of flower buds. I saw this tree again on 1 October 1986, and it still had all its leaves. There were no buds or flowers and only twelve maturing fruits were visible from the ground.

As I mentioned earlier, my efforts to locate the tree that Morris [1884 p.19] said was to be found at Constant Spring was a failure and so were my efforts to locate the tree Proctor thought might be found at Kings House or Hope Gardens. The discovery of other trees came from an entirely different source.

I received one of my most important leads regarding baobabs in Jamaica while searching for material in the library and herbarium of the Natural History Division of the Institute of Jamaica. During the course of my visit to the Institute, I met Norma Johanneson, the head of the Natural History Division, and told her of my interest in locating baobab trees. She provided me with a copy of an article dealing with the baobab in Jamaica written by Alex Hawkes and published in the *Gleaner* on 21 May 1970. It was the continuation of an earlier article which appeared on 16 April 1970.

Alex Hawkes travelled widely in Jamaica and was well-known through his column in the *Daily Gleaner* which focused on the island's flora. The 16 April article titled "Save Jamaica's Rare African Baobab Tree" showed that he was surprised to learn about the existence of the baobab in Jamaica as I was. Hawkes wrote:

I was not aware that Jamaica possessed any specimens of this extraordinary Baobab tree, until I received a letter from Mr. C. Bernard Lewis, Director of the Institute of Jamaica. This read, in part, "I am concerned about the safety of the Baobab tree which is growing on the side of the gully by Munroe Road. For a number of years we have been calling it to the attention of the KSAC officials and up until recently, although bulldozers had been working around it, it appeared to be relatively safe. Now they have come quite close to the tree, and appear to be undermining it. I mentioned this to Mr. Theodore Sealy, the Editor of **The Daily Gleaner** who knows the tree quite well, and I am sure he would support us in our representation to try to save it."

In conversation with Mr. Lewis, I find that this is presumably the only example of the African Baobab still alive in all of Jamaica . . . .

This priceless tree, certainly is unique, and an example of Jamaica's African heritage, is not in the path of anyone's progress hence its destruction simply cannot be condoned . . . .

As has been pointed out in these pages far too frequently of late, we are losing far too many of our precious trees, which are absolutely irreplaceable within our current life spans. I venture to suggest that our special African Baobab tree should become a special case, and that all of us join together in preserving it for our children and grand-children and indeed great-grand children! It takes so little effort to destroy such a tree. And these days it seems to require such a concerted public effort to preserve it!

While Hawkes was convinced that this tree by Munroe Road was the only one alive in Jamaica at the time he wrote the article, he does tell us that 'formerly, there was a large specimen near Port Henderson, but this was destroyed by a hurricane, and some seedlings seem to have died off as well.'

Hawkes's discussion of the baobab in his 21 May article was prompted by the public response to his first article. He wrote:

After all these years I should of course have known that the Baobab at the Mountain View Gully at Munroe Road was not our Island's only example!

I now have authenticated reports of a total of six Baobabs in this country, and I wonder if more will not show up, later on. I am delighted to be put right, but am a bit embarrassed to find that one of the handsomest young Baobabs occurs on the very street where I reside! This was kindly brought to my attention by Dr. A.H. Harty and is to be seen at 39 Hopefield Avenue, Kingston 6, across the way from Campion College.

At the JHS Flower Show, Mrs. N. Hood-Daniel of Spur Tree, told me of two Baobabs at Phoenix Hampden Estates, in Trelawny, from which she had not long ago obtained a ripe fruit.

And then, finally and most important, there are two Baobab trees in the grounds of the Convent of Mercy Academy, "Alpha", on South Camp Road, Kingston 4. There is a small one at the Boys' School, and at the Girls' School there is an absolutely magnificent huge tree! This was brought to my attention by a kind letter from Mr. Bill du Mont, Games Master at the institution.

I visited the Phoenix Hampden Estates in the midst of the flooding in June. I did a tour of the estate (which at that time was reduced to mud) and I spoke to the employees and staff but I was unable to locate the two trees that were said to be there. Another attempt was made by Dr. Allen Jacobs of Montego Bay, but this too was unsuccessful.

I was successful in locating the two trees at Alpha and as Hawkes indicated, they are magnificent, especially the tree at the girls' school which matches some of the most beautiful specimens I have seen anywhere.

In his article Hawkes said that the tree at the boys' school was a small one, but it is not. I was surprised to see an enormous tree some sixty feet tall that was thirty-three feet in circumference measured at about three and one-half feet from the ground. This is one of the largest baobab trees I have seen in the Caribbean. Sister Marie Therese who is in charge of the boys' school said that when she first arrived in 1939 it was already a large tree. Unfortunately, a good third of the tree which had grown over the roof of one of the buildings had been chopped off sometime between the end

of April and the beginning of May 1986 and the pieces, some of which were quite large, were strewn all around the base of the tree. Noel Herman, a guidance counselor at the school said the branches had been cut because they were damaging the zinc roof of the print shop by resting on it and by the trampling of the boys who climb the roof to get at the fruits, the pulp and seeds of which they eat. The only other place I know of in the Caribbean where the fruit is eaten is St. Croix where the pulp is used to make a drink, which is sold in the Christiansted market. The boys also used the flowers to play a game called 'keep up'. They compete to see who can bounce a flower up and down on the top of the foot the most times. The flower when used in this context is called 'seaway lash'. When I saw the tree on 5 June, it was full of new leaves but there were no fruits, due perhaps to the fact that the boys eat them. The tree was flowering, for it had buds, and I saw a few withered flowers on the ground amidst the tangle of scattered branches.

The tree at Alpha girls' school is a spectacular one of immense size and remarkable beauty and is among the most impressive examples in the Caribbean. The remarks of Leonard Webb, a night watchman at the school shows that it has not escaped attention:

You think a one or two smadi come ya come snap [photograph] dis tree man. Lawd! Yes sir, nuff, nuff. For de 20 years me de ya very seldom you no see smadi come snap dis tree.

The tree which is about fifty to fifty-five feet in height is relatively short for its enormous girth which is forty-eight feet in circumference, when measured at approximately three feet from the ground. I estimate the tree to be 150 to 200 years old. It could well have been planted during the time of Hinton East. Sister Mill Delores who came from Malta to teach at Alpha said that the tree 'was as big as it is now' when she first saw it in 1913. On the north and northeastern side of the tree there were many young leaves intermingled with large yellowing leaves and for much of the rest of the tree, there was a great mass of mature green leaves. I saw only one mature fruit on the tree. Leonard Webb said he has seen people collecting the fruits during the season although he did not know why. There were numerous flower buds on the tree along with blooms in various stages of decay, and these were also to be found on the ground.

On 3 October I saw the tree again and it seems as if it had just as many flower buds and blooms as I had seen four months earlier. Sister Irene who is the art teacher is in a good position to observe this tree closely and she said that it flowered most in September and October and that there are many withered blooms on the ground at that time. The one significant difference I observed between 5 June and 3 October is that there were many young fruits that were in the earliest stages of development.

Bees frequently establish their hives in baobab trees and this was no exception. Another reported characteristic of the baobab, that in Africa it frequently grows in close association with the tamarind tree, was also borne out here: three tamarind seedlings were growing between its large roots. The workman responsible for the area said that in 'cleaning the bush' that springs up around the base of the tree, he had removed such seedlings before.

It is clear that this unusual tree has become an important part of the school memories for the students of Alpha girls'



School. Anyone who sees the tree cannot fail to note, as Hawkes did [May 1970] that:

Alpha girls past and present have carved initials all over the impressive bulk, and when I visited it again the other day, its bark was plastered with posters urging students to vote for this or that candidate in a special school election.

Seventeen years later the students are still carving their names on the tree though they also now use spray paint. Former student Vanessa Soares (1977) left a record of what she thought the tree meant to the students. In *Hibiscus* — the school's newspaper (1:1) — she wrote:

Sturdily and proudly amongst all the beautiful Alpha girls he stood. A graceful figure, tall, dark and handsome, just the right qualifications. It was as if he was whispering sweet music in their ears, for they all smiled, seated around him, all bewitched. The . . . Baobab . . . had made more conquests.

For many years, it has provided cool shade for the students who all love to sit on the benches built in a circular shape around it . . . This 'cool dude' is the joy and pride of every Alpha girl, I'm sure. And you know now why Alpha girls are so strong-willed and determined, who wouldn't, 'having been so husbanded.

A wooden ladder goes from the top bench into the crown of the tree where students go to sit and to carve or paint their names on the trunk and branches. I was told that the ladder was originally built as part of the props for a play that took place in and under the tree. A look through the Alpha yearbook reveals that the tree is a favourite spot for clubs, organizations, and classes to have their photographs taken.

While the boys use the flowers to play 'keep up', the girls traditionally use the flowers in their various art projects, a fact that was noted by Hawkes in 1970. The tree is ideally located for the purpose because it grows directly in front of the art room. Sister Irene told me that the girls do drawings and watercolours of the flowers which they also mount on shingles after the petals have been taken apart and shellacked to strengthen, preserve, and colour them. Sister Irene said the girls often prefer the dried flowers in their projects because the fresh ones produce 'a horrible odour'.

## Conclusion

My efforts to date have only confirmed the existence in Jamaica of the four baobab trees illustrated in this article. My initial review of the literature and my own experience suggest that there are more trees that have not yet been identified. It is clear, however, that no matter how many trees we discover, we will never reach a situation where we can agree with Macfayden in saying that the baobab is 'frequently to be met with'. Whatever the actual number, I think it is reasonable to conclude that the baobab is, in fact, a rare tree in Jamaica, although it was first reported some 200 years ago. The baobab is a remarkable tree with many uses, and it should definitely be more widely cultivated in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean.

## Notes

1. I hope that this article will encourage others with information on the location of other trees or their history to contact **JAMAICA JOURNAL** or the Institute of Jamaica.
2. For basic information on the baobab see Chevalier [1906], Owen [1970, 1974] and Wickens [1979].

3. The heights of trees presented in this paper are rough estimates but the circumferences (and the distances from the ground at which they are measured) were all determined by the use of a tape measure.

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