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THE DISTRIBUTION, HISTORY AND USE OF THE AFRICAN BAOBAB IN BARBADOS

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ABSTRACT

With seven species in Madagascar and one in Australia, the tropical genus *Adansonia* is a small, well-defined group of Old World trees of which the giant African baobab (*Adansonia digitata* L.) is one of the most prominent members. The African baobab was probably introduced to the Caribbean in the early eighteenth century, and although it is now widespread in the region, it remains a rare tree wherever it grows. Barbados is no exception. This paper discusses all the baobabs identified in Barbados through published accounts, interviews and islandwide searches, and it documents, to the extent possible, their history and cultural importance.

DESCRIPTION

The baobab grows 20 m or more in height and is readily distinguished by its huge bulging trunk or trunks that seem strangely disproportionate to the trees moderate height and thick, rapidly tapering branches. It 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 are usually five in number and vary in size. The baobab is often leafless for a good part of the year in the drier parts of Africa. In the Caribbean, leaves are usually shed during the winter dry season and new leaves are produced in the spring or early summer and last through the fall.

Appearing as early as May and continuing into late September and early October – even into November in some cases – are large, waxy, hibiscus-like flowers (about 15 cm across) that are white or cream-coloured and hang ‘upside-down’ on long stalks.

From these flowers develop large, woody, gourd-like capsules that are oblong in shape, up to 30 cm long and 10 cm in diameter, and covered by what seems like brown velvet. Each fruit weighs from 1.5 to 5.5 kg and contains from 30 to 400 brown, kidney-shaped seeds. The seeds are embedded in a white or cream-coloured acidic pulp laced together by a mass of tough, stringy fibres that also divide the interior of the fruit into segments in a manner similar to that of an orange or any other citrus. These fruits mature through the summer and autumn, and they ripen and fall from the tree in the winter, spring and early summer.

DISTRIBUTION IN THE NEOTROPICS

The history and cultural significance of the baobab in Barbados are a small but important part of any effort to account for its introduction and spread in the tropical and subtropical regions of the New World (Rashford, 1987a, 1991). The need for such information is clearly recognized in the scientific literature (Maheshwari, 1971; Wickens, 1982). Armstrong (1984) notes, for example, that "The occurrence of *Adansonia digitata* in the New World has not been documented as closely as its distribution in the lands surrounding the Indian Ocean Basin". He goes on to conclude that "A more thorough study of the distribution of this species in the Caribbean area, and its role in the ethnobotany of territories such as Haiti would be worthwhile".

Owen (1970) reports baobabs in South America, and although it is said to be 'rare' in Florida I have identified over 50 trees and I suspect there are many more. The tree is also described as 'rare' in the Caribbean, but it is far more common than is generally recognized. I have seen trees in Jamaica, Antigua, St Kitts, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and the United States Virgin Islands (specifically in St Thomas, St John and especially St Croix). There are also reports of its presence in Tobago, Cuba, Haiti, Nevis, Dominica, Bahamas, and the Dutch Leeward Islands. Because of human dispersal in the Caribbean and around the world, the baobab is especially common in the more intensively managed areas of the human environment including roadsides, public grounds, religious places, nurseries, parks, home gardens, and botanic gardens (Burton-Page, 1969; Vaid, 1978; Varmah and Vaid, 1978; Wickens, 1982; Rashford, 1987a, 1991).

THE BACKGROUND TO THE PRESENT STUDY

Only one or two trees are mentioned in most scholarly and popular accounts of the baobab in Barbados (e.g. Maycock, 1830; Gooding et al. 1965; Hargreaves, 1965, 1972; Seddon and Lennox, 1980). The only estimate of a larger number was given by Clyde Crichlow in several newspaper articles in the *Trinidad Guardian* and the (Trinidad) *Express*. Based on Crichlow's comments, if there are "at least three and possibly five or more in Tobago" (Crichlow, 1987) and two in Trinidad (Jeffrey, 1987), then there would be anywhere from three to five trees in Barbados. This paper verifies the existence of six trees in Barbados and identifies three which I have not seen. (Figure 1; Table 1).

THE WARREN BAOBAB

There is no mention of baobabs in Barbados in 17th-century accounts of the island's natural history which include the well known works of Ligon (1657), Sloane (1687) and Plunket (1691-1696). The earliest report was that of the Anglican priest, the Reverend Griffiths Hughes, in *The Natural History of Barbados* (1750). He dealt specifically with the Warren tree. Hughes identified the baobab as the 'Corn-Tree' noting that it was brought to Barbados "about twelve Years ago from Guiney, and now grows at the Estate of Mrs. Warren, at the Black-Rock Plantation". At 12 years old the Warren tree had not yet flowered and Hughes (1750) in his description of it wrote:

"Its present Growth is about sixteen Feet high, branching chiefly towards the Top; the Bark is of a greyish White; and its leffer Branches at the Top cloath'd with five green Leaves, furrourding one common Centre; these are two Inches and a half long, and an Inch and an half broad".

Hughes was clearly uncertain as to the true identity of the tree. He writes:

"It is said, that it bears, in its native Soil several long cylindrical Ears, not ill refembling a large Mold-candle, round which Stalk the Grains are disposed; but as this never bore any, and as we have no authentic Writers mentioning the Growth of such a Tree in any Part of Africa, I much doubt of the real Existence of such an one: However, it may not be amifs to describe it."

Hughes unfamiliarity with the baobab and his skepticism of what he had heard is understandable. Although there were increasing reports of the tree in Africa with the development of European exploration, trade and colonization, the baobab was still not well known to Europeans in 1750 when Hughes published his book. Michel Adanson, the French botanist from whom the baobab derives its generic name, encountered the tree while traveling in Senegal from 1749 to 1753.

Table 1 A summary of baobab trees in Barbados

Tree site	Status	Girth (m)	Age (years)	Flower	Fruit	Fruit used	Shade
1. Speightstown	NS	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Dunscombe	US	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. Flower Forest	TO	0.45	10±	N	N	N	N
4. Warrens	TO	14.04	257	Y	Y	Y	Y
5. Queen Park	TO	18.30	250±	Y	?	?	Y
6. Fraser	TO	0.72	20±	N	N	N	N
7. Pavilion	TO	2.30	50±	Y	?	?	Y
8. Buttals	DT	-	-	-	-	-	-
9. Gov. Indust. School	TO	3.50	60±	Y	Y	Y	?
10. Brathwaite I	NS	-	-	-	-	-	-
11. Braithwaite II	NS	-	-	-	-	-	-

Key: - TO = Trees observed; DT = Dead trees; US = Unsuccessful Search; NS = Trees not seen; Y = yes; N = no; ? = uncertain; - = no information

Adanson was a student of Bernard de Jussieu, and it was Bernard de Jussieu's report of Adanson's findings that led Linnaeus to mention the tree in his *Species Plantarum* published in 1753. In Senegal, Adanson knew the baobab as the calabash tree. This was how the tree was known to the French and the Portuguese in Africa, and the name points to the recognition of the gourd-like shell of the fruit as a useful container. Linnaeus realized, however, that the tree was already known as the 'baobab', an Arabic name mentioned by Alpin and Bauhin who were familiar with the medicinal use of the powdered fruit pulp which reached Europe through trade.

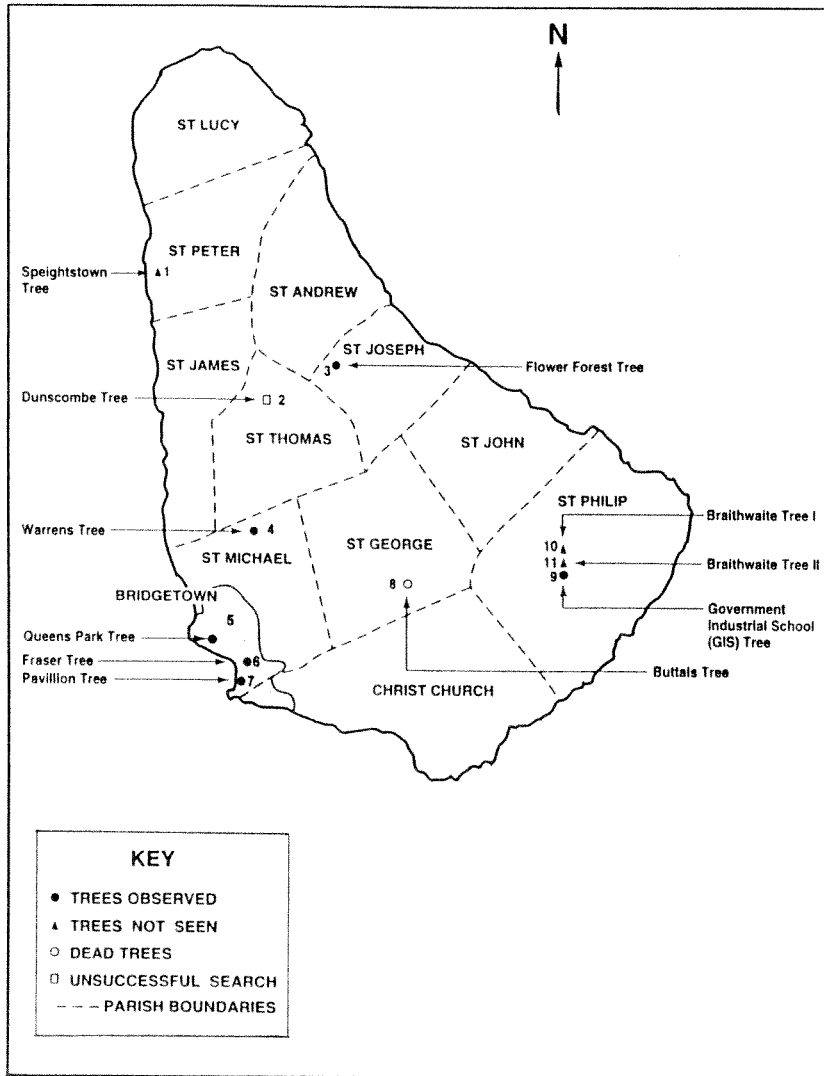


Figure 1 Distribution and status of baobabs in Barbados. Numbers 1 - 11 identify all Barbadian baobabs past and present (See Table 1)

Despite his uncertainty as to the true identity of the Warren tree (which he referred to as the corn tree as earlier noted), it is fortunate that Hughes thought it worthy of description. In 1830, just 80 years later, Maycock wrote:

“There is certainly no tree in Barbados that bears for its fruit a “long cylindrical ear, not ill resembling a large mould-candle, round which stalk the grains (of corn) are disposed,” as stated by Hughes. From his general description, however, of the corn tree, and from his account of the period of its introduction into the island, I have little doubt of his meaning what is now generally termed the Baobab, or Monkies’ Bread Fruit Tree”.

Today, 257 years after Hughes’s account, the Warren baobab is a magnificent tree which is 14.25 m in circumference measured at 90 cm from the ground. It was covered with green leaves when I saw it for the first time on 4 November. There were no flowers and the tree was laden with green fruits.

The Warren baobab is now a cultural landmark in Barbados. Hoyos reports in 1982 that:

“Captain Maurice Hutt, a Council member of the Barbados National Trust ... recommended a list of areas of natural beauty and ecological importance and it is interesting to learn that he includes, among his suggestions, the preservation of this baobab tree”.

A sign has now been placed in front of the Warren baobab by the Barbados National Trust that gives a brief account of its history.

THE QUEEN’S PARK BAOBAB

Although the Warren baobab is the earliest reported in Barbados, it is not the biggest. This distinction belongs to the Queen’s Park baobab which measured at 75 cm from the ground was 18 m in circumference. This tree was not mentioned in any of the 18th or 19th century accounts, a fact that is surprising since some were published well after the tree had become familiar to Europeans as evidenced by Maycock’s description (1830) of the Warren baobab.

The earliest reference to the Queen’s Park tree was made in 1922 by an anonymous author in *Hardwood Records* who also noted (though it was 72 years ago) that “tree is now some 60 feet in circumference and appears very thrifty considering that there is an annual protracted dry season during which the leaves are shed and growth is at an apparent standstill”.

“Unfortunately,” wrote the author, “very little is definitely known with reference to the history of this interesting tree. Nevertheless, he reports that:

“The story is told by the oldest residents of Bridgetown that the tree was planted about 230 years ago and that a slave trader brought the young plant with him to Barbadoes, which was at that time a distributing point for slaves brought in from West Africa”.

If there is any truth to the story – which it is impossible to say without corroboration – the Queen's Park tree would have dated from 1692 making it 230 years old in 1922 and 302 years old today – the oldest and most impressive baobab in Barbados and one of the very best specimens in the Caribbean.

THE BUTTAL'S BAOBAB

The Warren and Queen's Park baobabs are the best known in Barbados and are usually the only ones mentioned in published accounts. They are not, however, the only trees identified in early reports. In the mid-19 century, Schomburgk (1848), following his description of the Queen's Park tree noted that there was "Another specimen, less in size, ... at Buttal's". Repeated enquiries and searches have failed to turn up any evidence that this tree has survived.

THE GOVERNMENT INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL BAOBAB

After I had finished measuring and photographing the Queen's Park baobab on Friday 4 November it started to rain, so I took a taxi from the park to where I was staying. The driver was Jeffrey Hunt and he got my full attention when he accurately described the fruit and went on to note that people his age (which was 45) ate it. Jeffrey knew a lot about baobabs in Barbados. He said all the taxi drivers knew the tree, especially the one at Warren and the Queen's Park tree. I was surprised when he told me that "two to three times a week" he and other taxi drivers were asked by tourists who came on cruise ships to take them to the Queen's Park baobab. I asked Jeffrey if he knew of any other trees besides the Warren and Queen's Park baobabs and he said there was one that bore fruit at the Government Industrial School (GIS) near St Philip.

I had a chance to see the GIS baobab on the afternoon of 5 November 1994. Some 9 m tall, it was 43.4 m in circumference measured at 90 cm from the ground, and is probably anywhere from 50 to 100 years old.

THE BRAITHWAITE I AND BRAITHWAITE II BAOBABS

One of the individuals I interviewed at the GIS tree was Selvin Braithwaite. He knew nothing about baobabs in general but he was quite familiar with the GIS tree. He said the boys at the school called it the 'oak' or 'acorn' tree and that they ate the fruit. He also ate the fruit, and he said because he was curious about the tree, he planted some seeds and there were now two seedlings at his home. One was 60 cm tall and the other was only 15 cm tall because he had cut off the top. The 60-cm seedling is here identified as Braithwaite I and the other as Braithwaite II.

THE PAVILION BAOBAB

On Saturday 5 November, as I was returning to my hotel after visiting the GIS tree, I spotted a small baobab that has never been reported on the old Pavilion grounds along Bay

Street. The pavilion is an important part of the architectural heritage of Barbados. It was originally built of red brick in 1806 by the same military engineers who constructed the barracks around Garrison Savannah (Hoyos, 1982), and it served as the residence of the Medical Officer to the General Hospital for the Garrison. The hospital buildings that were part of the Pavilion complex have now been converted into apartments known as Pavilion Court (Fraser et al., 1990).

The baobab, which was at the northern part of the grounds, was 2.3 m in circumference measured at 60 cm from the ground. It was a beautiful, healthy tree in full leaf that was growing tall and slender because it is crowded on all sides by other trees which included a frangipani (*Plumeria rubra* L.) to the north-west, a flamboyant (*Delonix regia* (Boj. ex Hook.) Raf.) to the north and a black willow (*Capparis*) to the south-west. There were no branches on the north-west side because of the large flamboyant. This is a small but mature baobab. Though there were no flowers or fruits on the tree, I did collect six tiny fruits still attached to the flower/fruit stalk that had fallen from the tree.

THE FRASER BAOBAB

Henry Fraser is a well-known Barbadian physician and scholar who is actively involved in the Barbados National Trust. We first met at a reception for a group of Charleston, South Carolina, visitors who were on a trip sponsored by the Charleston Museum to explore the historic links between Charleston and Barbados. He was quite familiar with an article I had published on baobab trees in Jamaica (Rashford, 1987a), and during the course of our conversation, he told me of a small tree he had planted at his home in Bridgetown. He gave me an enjoyable and informative tour of Bridgetown on the afternoon of Sunday, 6 November, and I had a chance to learn much about the architectural history of the city and to see some of the excellent restoration that had been done by the Barbados National Trust.

We ended the afternoon at his home where I had a chance to see the Fraser Baobab. It was a beautiful, vigorous tree that was 74 cm in circumference measured at 37.5 cm from the ground.

THE FLOWER FOREST BAOBAB

On Friday 4 November, the second day of my 1994 visit to Barbados, my colleague Anne Bynoe told me of a young tree at Flower Forest, a beautiful garden on what used to be Richmond Plantation in the hills of St Joseph. I had also read about this tree in *The Ins and Outs of Barbados*, an in-room guide 'recommended' by the Barbados Hotel Association and 'endorsed' by the Barbados Tourism Authority. "At the geographical centre of the Flower Forest," wrote the authors Keith and Sally Miller, "can be found a young Baobab tree – planted there in recognition of the African tradition of having such a tree in the centre of every village". I visited Flower Forest on Monday 7 November and was impressed by its panoramic view overlooking the east coast of Barbados. The Flower Forest baobab was a

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beautiful small tree some 2.4 to 2.7 m tall and covered with lush green leaves. It was 45 cm in circumference measured at 23 cm from the ground.

THE SPEIGHTSTOWN BAOBAB

In 1987, I gave a talk on baobabs in the Caribbean at the annual meeting of the Caribbean Food Crops Society in Port of Spain, Trinidad. After the talk, I met Huston Holder who at the time was working with the Cooperative Extension Service of the University of the Virgin Islands in St Croix. He told me of a baobab at Speightstown and since he knows the tree well I have no reason to doubt its existence. In 1994 I made an effort to locate this tree but was unsuccessful.

THE DUNSCOMBE BAOBAB

I also learned of a baobab tree at Dunscombe from Horatio Maynard who I interviewed in 1994. Dr Klaus De Albuquerque and I tried to locate it but we were unsuccessful.

USES OF THE AFRICAN BAOBAB IN BARBADOS

We have seen that the baobab is indeed a rare tree in Barbados which explains its unfamiliarity to many Barbadians. It clearly does not rank among the island's most important practical and inspirational trees. This is in stark contrast to its native Africa where the tree as a whole and its various parts especially the shell, pulp and seeds of the fruit and the flower, bark, hollow trunk and leaves – have been put to a variety of uses (Dalziel, 1937; Owen, 1968, 1970; Wickens, 1982).

Shade

The intensity of the tropical sun makes shade more than a matter of mere comfort. It is a necessity. The baobab is valued for its shade in Barbados as it is elsewhere in the Caribbean, India and in its native Africa (Rashford, 1987b). This is particularly true of the Queen's Park and Warren baobab. The Queen's Park tree, growing as it is in one of the most well known public places of rest, recreation and celebration in Bridgetown, is ideally situated as a shade tree. The area surrounding the Queen's Park tree has been fenced in as it is now the site of a children's playground. The Warren tree is also ideally suited as a shade tree as it grows along the side of one of the island's much travelled roads.

¹ The 'practical' use of trees includes food as well as such things as wood, fuel and medicine. The 'inspirational' use includes the appreciation of such things as its beauty, historical significance and religious value.

Food

In Africa, the baobab's fruit, with its shell, pulp and seeds, is one of the most useful parts of the tree because it is produced in abundance and is useful in many ways. That Barbadians eat the baobab's fruit is an important use of the tree that, surprisingly enough, has never been reported in scholarly or popular publications.

Because the fruit of the baobab and the tamarind (*Tamarindus indica* L.) have remarkably similar taste, many African, Indian and Caribbean common names for the baobab indicate that it is viewed as a kind of tamarind. 'Monkey tamarind' is the earliest identified tamarind name for the baobab in the Caribbean and it seems to be of Caribbean origin (Rashford, 1994). Unlike the names 'baobab', 'Ethiopian sour gourd' and 'monkey bread', 'monkey tamarind' does not appear in any of the standard English dictionaries or in the most familiar sources of information on baobabs in the Caribbean (e.g. Edwards, 1794; Lunan, 1814; Macfadyen, 1850; Adams, 1972).

Nevertheless, 'monkey tamarind' has been reported in Jamaica (Rock, 1861) and is still current. In 1970, Alex Hawkes visited the oldest and most impressive baobab in Jamaica which grows in Kingston at the Convent of Mercy Academy, also know as Alpha Girls School. And he wrote about it in his widely-read newspaper column in the Jamaica *Daily Gleaner*. He described it as "an absolutely magnificent huge tree" noting that it "is known by the students fondly as monkey tamarind". Hawkes says this was his first encounter with this name, which is still in use among the students today. In 1977 in the first edition of *Hibiscus*, the Alpha Academy newspaper, a student, Vanessa Soarez, wrote an article titled 'Monkey tamarind tree' (1977) in which she offered a description of the tree and her impressions of its significance to every Alpha girl. The name monkey tamarind has also been reported for the Bahamas (Ives, 1880), and Dominica (Gerth Van Wijk, 1971).

Ives (1880) describes a tree in the Bahamas that he identified as Jamaican tamarind and noted that it was "sometimes" called monkey tamarind. Although Ives did not offer a scientific name, the vernacular names and description he used identify the tree as a baobab – probably introduced to the Bahamas from Jamaica as suggested by the name Jamaican tamarind. In St Croix and St Eustatius it is called Guinea tamarind (Some Crucians also know the tree as Guinea almond because they eat the seeds which taste like the tropical almond, *Terminalia catappa* L.). Two of the three common names for the baobab in Barbados are consistent with the above. The tree is called sweet tamarind because the baobab's fruit is not as sour as that of the tamarind, and flour tamarind because the dry pulp has the appearance of flour. We have seen that the GIS baobab is called acorn or oak by the students and by those who live in close proximity to the tree. All the individuals interviewed in association with the GIS tree were unfamiliar with other Barbadian baobabs.

Flower

Some 24 hours after blooming, the baobab sheds the petals along with the staminal tube to which they are attached. The calyx, however, remains a part of the long fruit-stalk.

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It sometimes happens (and more so with some trees than with others) that the tree sheds not only the corolla and the staminal tube, but the entire stalk with its tiny fruit. Some Antiguan and Barbadian women collect these for floral arrangements. It bears a very striking resemblance to a flower and the long, stiff stalk makes it ideal for various arrangements.

CONCLUSION

This account of the baobab in Barbados is offered in response to the expressed need for more information about the distribution, history and use of this species in the Caribbean and in the neotropics generally. This information is especially appropriate today since the Queens Park and the Warren baobabs are increasingly featured in tourist publications. It is also the author's hope that the discussion of this species at conferences and in Caribbean scholarly and popular literature will lead to a more systematic effort to cultivate it throughout the region.

NOTE

In this paper, the local names for individual baobab trees are accepted when they exist. Otherwise, Barbadian baobabs are named for their location or for the individual with whom they are associated.

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