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# JAMAICA JOURNAL

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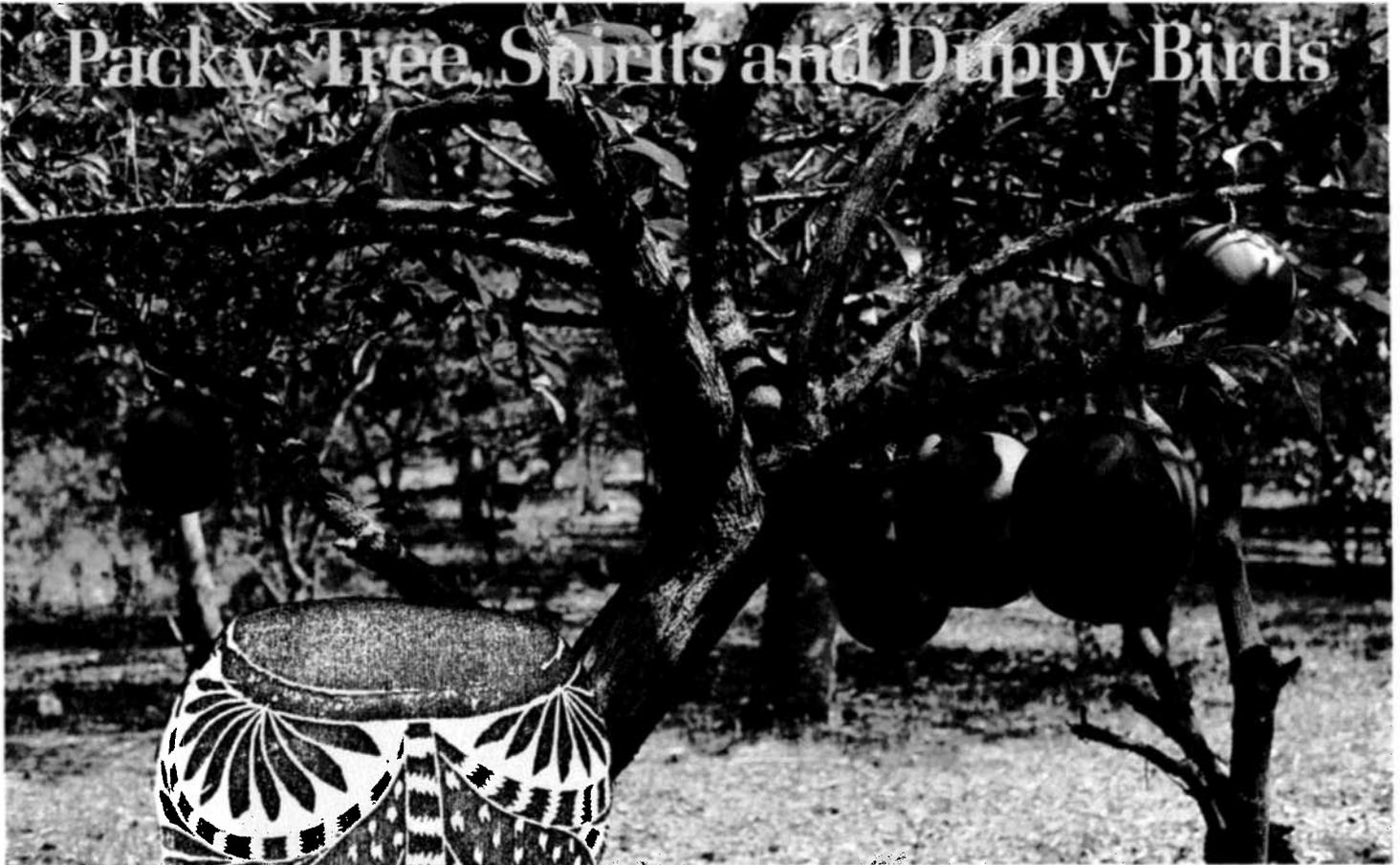
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# Packy Tree, Spirits and Duppy Birds



John Rashford

A calabash tree (above); left: carved calabash from the Dominican Republic.

By John Rashford

The common name 'calabash' is applied to a number of botanically unrelated plants. The best known of these bear gourd-like fruits that are used to make a wide variety of valuable containers and other useful objects. The three important plants to which the name is applied are the calabash tree of tropical America (*Crescentia* spp.); the calabash or baobab tree of Africa (*Adansonia digitata*) — the 'African calabash' — known in Jamaica as monkey tamarind; and the well known bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*), which is also from Africa. We will look at the cultural importance of the American calabash tree to Jamaicans, focusing on the way in which it is traditionally associated with the spiritual realm, i.e. its relationships to the world of spirits and to duppy birds.<sup>1</sup>

## Description

The calabash is a member of the Bignoniaceae or trumpet flower family,

This is one of a series of occasional articles by the author on plants associated with the spirit realm in Jamaica. Previous articles described John Crow Bead (*Abrus precatorius*) (17: 2) and the Cotton Tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) (18:1).

and it grows from Central America and the Caribbean to Brazil and Peru. It probably owes its widespread distribution to human dispersal for it is a useful tree to the people of tropical America. One of the earliest accurate descriptions of the tree following Columbus' discovery of the New World was that of Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes who came to the Americas in 1514. He knew of the tree's importance to Amerindians for he wrote of it as a source of food, medicine, wood, and various containers. The usefulness of the tree which makes it a likely candidate for human dispersal means it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to determine its true place of origin in contrast to those places into which it has been deliberately or inadvertently introduced. For the moment, however, I agree with Heiser [1979: 16] who wrote: 'Whether it was originally native to Middle America or to South America is not clear. It does apparently occur as a wild plant in Middle America, and I am inclined to think that it was carried from there to South America and the West Indies in prehistoric times.' The tree also grows in southern Florida and it has now been introduced into

California, Bermuda and the Old World tropics.

The calabash grows throughout Jamaica from sea level to about fourteen hundred feet. It is frequently found in home gardens, and Adams [1972] describes it as 'common', occurring along 'roadsides, and in old pastures, thickets and woodland margins'. This small spreading tree reaches from twenty to thirty feet in height. It has a crooked trunk and long, relatively slender branches that form an open crown. The tree produces single, slightly leathery, 'apron-shaped' leaves. They are moderately shiny on top and pale underneath and grow mostly in clusters of three to five on spurs along the branches. The large, waxy, bell-shaped flowers are approximately two and a half inches long, and one and three-quarter inches wide; they are borne mostly on the trunk and older branches, and are 'light-green' or 'greenish-yellow' in colour with purple streaks and touches of red and yellow. From these flowers develop large, rounded, woody, indehiscent, gourd-like fruits; they are glossy green in colour when young, and they turn brown as they ripen and become dry.



Fruits growing from the trunk and branches give the tree a very unusual appearance, making it a conspicuous feature of the landscape. The calabash flowers and fruits for much of the year.

### Uses

One of the most important plants to the people of Africa from both a practical and a religious point of view is the bottle gourd and it is reasonable to assume that many of the uses and some of the beliefs associated with the bottle gourd were readily transferred to the calabash when Africans were brought to the New World. The bottle gourd does grow in Jamaica, but it is not common. It would probably be more common were it not for the fact that the calabash is widespread, thrives with little or no cultivation, and the fruits, which are in season for most of the year, are readily available at little or no cost. Its many uses have earned the calabash tree a place, however modest, in the history of Jamaica's technology, commerce, medicine, art, music, dance, sports, proverbs, folk tales and traditional religious belief.

### Tree

The tree itself is valued for its shade, and there are some who cultivate it as an ornamental or garden curiosity.

### Wood

The calabash can hardly be considered a very good timber tree having only a small, crooked trunk that branches close to the ground. Nevertheless, its hard, pale brown, moderately heavy wood has been put to a number of uses in Jamaica. In the eighteenth century, Long [1774: 752] described it as 'very tough and fitter for the coach-makers' use than any other sort of timber known'. Forty years after, Lunan [1814 :140] wrote that it was also used 'for making saddles, mule and ass crooks, stools, chairs, and other furniture, as also shafts or handles for carpenters' tools'. Harris [1909] and Ryman [1980] make similar reports, and Ryman indicates that the wood has also been used to make 'ribs in boat building' and as a base on which to grow orchids.<sup>2</sup>

### Leaves

Sir Hans Sloane [1707 : 173], in one of the earliest accounts of Jamaica's plant life, noted that the calabash was to be found 'everywhere in the Savanna's and woods of Jamaica . . .,' and he pointed out that 'in scarcity of grass by drought, cattle feed on this fruit fallen



*Calabashes come in a wide variety of shapes, shades and sizes, as these examples show.*



John Rashford

off the boughs, or the trees are then cut down on purpose that they may feed on both the fruit and the leaves. . . ' It is difficult to say how common it was at that time to cut calabash trees for feed. Although plants in wide variety are still collected for animal feed, there is no indication that the leaves and fruits of the calabash are ever among them.

## Fruit

In Jamaica, the unripe fruit of the calabash is used as a cricket ball [Ryman, 1980 : 4]. This is only one small reason why the most valuable part of the calabash is its fruit; the pulp and seeds are a source of food and medicine, and the hard, woody shell is used to make containers and other useful objects.

## Food

In the eighteenth century, Browne [1756 : 266] reported that the pulp was occasionally eaten by African Jamaicans 'but not looked upon as either agreeable, or wholesome'. That the pulp is little eaten (if it ever was) is understandable considering that it has a fetid odour and an unsavoury taste. Little and Wadsworth [1964] describe it as poisonous. Nevertheless, there are reports that continue to identify the pulp (as well as the seeds) as edible. According to Ryman [1980], the pulp is 'cooked and eaten occasionally as a vegetable'. Morton [1981] says 'very young fruits have been picked in Jamaica' — and Ryman's [1980] recipe for making a pickle involves dicing and seeding the pulp and adding salt, vinegar, pepper and pimento seeds. Long [1774] also reports that the seeds were 'steeped' in water to make 'a tart, cooling beverage'.

## Medicine

Medicinally, the fruit is prepared in various ways to treat a variety of ailments, particularly coughs and colds. Roasting the young fruit and adding other ingredients seems to be the most basic procedure. Beckwith [1927 : 13] gives a detailed account of one such preparation: nine young fruits are roasted, strained, and boiled along with one pound of sugar, five sweetsop leaves (*Annona squamosa*) and five chigger nut leaves (*Tournefortia volubilis*). When it becomes thick, a pint of wine and a 'quattie' proof rum are added. A wine-glass of this is taken three times a day. Other accounts are much simpler. Asprey and Thornton [1953] describe

a cold remedy where the fruit is simply roasted, juiced and mixed with castor oil. Ryman's [1980] account indicates the extent to which this preparation is subject to variation: 'the calabash is baked and the pulp is then juiced and mixed with either salt, sugar or castor oil'.

The published accounts of the medicinal value of the calabash tree in Jamaica suggest that the basic procedure of roasting the fruit and mixing the juice with other ingredients could well be considered the source of an all-purpose remedy. Ryman [1980] said the cold and cough tonic described above was also good for treating 'worms' and 'bruised-blood, resulting from a blow'. Cohen [1973 : 104] also mentions a similar concoction prepared by the Maroons of Moore Town: the young fruit is roasted, strained into a tumbler, and a pinch of salt added. This is used not for colds, however, but for 'back pain'.<sup>3</sup>

One more thing should be mentioned here about the medicinal use of the calabash. According to Lunan, 'it is said that the pulp, if eaten, will make a cow cast her calf, or a mare her colt. It is certainly known (if not too well known) to be a great forcer of the *menstrua*, of the birth and after-birth; therefore ought to be very cautiously given or taken'.

## Shell

In the eighteenth century, Browne [1756: 266] reported 'the shell of the fruit is so thin and close that it serves to boil water, or any other fluid, as well as an earthen pot; and is observed to bear the fire equally, on repeated trials'. The Oxford English Dictionary [1961] makes a similar report. If this was proven to be true, the fruit would be remarkable indeed — a calabash cooking pot. Be that as it may, the fruit of the calabash is chiefly valued for its hard, woody shell which is thin, light-weight, durable and versatile — ideal for making a great variety of useful containers, including, presumably, the calabash cooking pot. Given the way in which it is to be used, the fruit is selected for its size, shape, colour and overall quality. Long [1774: 802] gives an excellent account of the way in which it was prepared in the eighteenth century:

They make a hole at one end, into which they pour hot water in order to dissolve the pulp; after this they extract the pulp with a stick, and rinse the whole inside thoroughly with sand and water, in order to loosen the fibres

that remain, and clear them away. After they are thus cleaned, they are suffered to dry, and are then fit for use.

Ryman [1981 : 40] gives an account of the way in which the fruit is prepared today:

This is achieved by either spooning or forcing the contents out with a piece of wire, depending on the size of the hole originally made in the top of the calabash. A thorough rinsing and scraping complete the cleaning process. The shell is often dried in the sun but some people prefer to hang it in their kitchen indefinitely, where it is 'cured' by smoke and heat.

The calabash has three names in Jamaica and each identifies the tree, the fruit, and containers made from the fruit. From the Twi language of West Africa, the word *apakyi* has become *packy* (*packi*, *packie*, *paki*, *pakie*). *Apakyi* is the specific name of 'a broad calabash' and it is also used to identify 'the whole calabash' [Cassidy and Le Page]. The Jamaican word *packy* identifies the tree, the fruit in general, and a particular kind of fruit — one that is the smallest in size and commonly used for utensils. The second name is *goady* (*goadi*, *goadie*, *gourdy*, *gourdie*, *guodi*); it is also used to identify the tree, the fruit in general, and a particular kind of fruit — a large calabash with a small hole at the top that is traditionally used for carrying water. The third name is *took-took*. It primarily identifies a medium-size fruit, which, like the *goady*, has a small hole at the top, and is primarily used to carry water. According to Cassidy [1971 : 84], the *took-took* got 'its name echoically from the sound it makes when water is poured from it'. Although this name might have originated as Cassidy suggests, today it identifies any medium size container, whether or not it has a small hole at the top. Beckwith describes the *took-took* as a 'fruit half-way between [the 'calabash' and the *packy*] in size' and she notes that Jamaican small farmers 'use these gourds for water carriers and drinking vessels'. Similarly, Ryman [1980] says: 'The *Took-Took*, predictably, refers to the in-between size and is often used as a dish for eating or moulding soft foods'.

In the early nineteenth century, Scott [1833] wrote of African Jamaican children who 'had all their little *packies* or calabashes, on their heads, full of provisions'. His observations highlight the value of the fruit as a container and point to the ubiquity of the calabash in Jamaica's everyday life at that time.

calabash and scraping the bones of animals together . . .

Shakers are mostly played by hand, especially today. In the past this was not so. In his description of the musical instruments in use during the early eighteenth century, Sloane [1707] noted that African Jamaicans 'have . . . in their dances rattles tied to their legs and wrists, and in their hands, with which they make a noise keeping time with one who makes a sounding answering it on the mouth of an empty gourd or jar with his hand'. In addition to shakers, the calabash has been used to make three other kinds of musical instruments in Jamaica. Ryman [1981] points out that Sloane mentions the use of a small 'gourd' fitted with a neck to make a flute. The second instrument was a string instrument — a kind of banjo, or guitar, or 'an imperfect kind of violoncello' — which Long identifies as *merry-wang*:

Their *merry-wang* is a favorite instrument, a rustic guitar, of four strings. It is made with a calabash; a slice of which being taken off, a dried bladder, or skin, is spread across the largest section; and this is fastened to a handle, which they take great pains in ornamenting with a sort of rude carved work, and ribbands [cited in Cassidy, 1971; 265].

The third instrument was the Jamaican *jenkoving* which Sloane mentions in passing in his discussion of rattles quoted above. Ryman [1981 : 44] says it was 'documented and described in the eighteenth century as a musical instrument made from an empty bottle or calabash, played by slapping the hands over the open mouth of the bottle/calabash'.

It is quite possible that scrapers (called *guiros* in Spanish) were at one time made from large calabashes in Jamaica. These are calabashes that would have been notched on one side against which a stick could be drawn to produce a sound amplified by the hollow gourd. The scraper is known in Jamaica, for I have seen it made from a joint of bamboo. There were probably more instruments made from the calabash than we are aware of today. We get some idea of this from Sloane's [1707] early description of African Jamaicans who, he said, had 'several sorts of instruments in imitation of lutes, made of small gourds fitted with necks, strung with horse hair, or the peeled stalks of climbing plants or withs'. As Cassidy [1971 : 263] has observed, however, 'modern instruments



Andreas Oberli

Noted calabash carver Brother Joseph shows off some of his work at his roadside stand at Castleton Gardens.

Proverbs, by virtue of being the collective wisdom of a society and a true product of common tradition, are very revealing for what they tell us about a culture's world view as it related to the ordinary routines of daily life. Jamaica's calabash proverbs focus on the value of the fruit and, in most cases, it is from the perspective of the fruit as a container.

Packy nebber bear pumpkin,  
Better water trow way dan gourdy bruk,  
Bruk calabash bring new one,  
Han' go packy come,  
Hollow gourd mek most noise,  
Keep you secret in a yu own gourdy.

Long [1774: 752] gives an account of the use of these containers in the eighteenth century, containers that were capable of holding from an ounce to a gallon, and were used to hold water or rum. African Jamaicans, he tells us,

. . . supply themselves from this tree, with very convenient, and not inelegant, cups, saucers, bowls, punch, and other ladles, spoons, and other utensils, of various shapes and sizes; upon some of which they bestow the best carved work in their power.

Decorated calabashes — calabashes that are carved, engraved, burnt, painted, dyed or polished — are still produced today, especially for sale to tourists. In describing his visit to Castleton Botanic Gardens in the early nineteen-fifties, Watkins [1952 : 82] writes:

On leaving Castleton we were besieged

by native craftsmen who had surrounded our taxi awaiting our departure.

Articles of timber bamboo, artfully carved, the decorated calabashes, and the colorful belts fashioned from tropical seeds are very cheap, usually decorative, and definitely 'of the land'.

Such curios are still made and sold at Castleton Botanic Gardens and at roadside stands and stalls along the north coast; they can also be found in the Kingston craft market and in shops.

#### Music

Rattles (Maraccas), traditionally called *shaka*, *shakey* or *shaker*, are among the many craft items for sale in Jamaica. They can be used singly but are typically used in pairs. Each is made from the hollow shell of a small calabash to which, in most cases, a handle is attached; enclosed within the shell are small stones or pebbles, or the seeds of the John-Crow bead, *Abrus precatorius* [Cassidy and Le Page, 1967], wild Canna, *Canna coccinea* [Beckwith, 1929], or some other plant. This instrument was recorded very early in Jamaica and it has been a very important part of the island's musical tradition. This is evident in Phillippo's [1843 : 243] description of 'John Connu' in the nineteenth century:

Several companions were associated with him (the John Connu, 'hero of the party') as musicians, beating banjos and tom-toms, blowing cow-horns, shaking a hard round black seed in a



The gourd-like fruit of the calabash (right) developed from the large waxy flower on the trunk (left).

have almost displaced the traditional, locally made ones of a former time, with their mostly African names and lineage'. Calabash flutes, banjos and *jenkovings* are probably unfamiliar to most Jamaicans today. This is not true of the shaker, however. It continues to be a very important instrument in Jamaican music and it has now achieved the status of a curio — a novelty, a craft item — as well.

#### Shell — Contemporary Uses

East Portland fishermen still use the calabash as a bailer and as a container for bait, sinkers, fish hooks, and other small items. I have also found that women who make coconut oil for sale continue to use it as a skimming vessel. It is clear, however, that calabash containers have been largely supplanted by industrial products made of enamelware, plastic, china, ceramic, glass, and metal. In fact, empty 'cheese-pans' were widely used in the district as a rough general container, along with other kinds of tin cans, soda bottles and cardboard boxes. Despite these changes, I am in agreement with Ryman [1981] who notes that although the uses of calabash containers will continue to alter, and some uses will disappear, they will always have a place in Jamaican culture.

Increasingly, its place in modern society is being established by both our traditional and 'schooled' carvers. Miraculously, the lowly calabash, often ignored and/or abused in the modern environment, is entering both local and foreign homes as teapots, dishes, bowls (large, medium, small), plant hangers, handbags, decorative wall ornaments, light shades, saving boxes and decanters.

The calabash container will also continue to find a place in Jamaica given the value placed upon it in the Rastafarian world view, where it is appreciated for its utility, its status as a 'natural' object, and its cultural association with the African tradition. In addition to the containers and container-like objects

mentioned above, we should also note that personal ornaments are made from small pieces of the calabash shell cut into various shapes and finished in a variety of ways. I know at least one individual in St Ann who uses the calabash to make bracelets, necklaces, earrings and pendants for sale to Jamaicans as well as to tourists.

#### Calabash and Spirits

Growing up in Jamaica, I vaguely remember the calabash being associated with spirits. I did not think much about it, however, nor did I consider it of great interest or importance. Moreover, although the tree is always mentioned in the early studies of Jamaica's plant life, it is not routinely associated with African Jamaican religious belief. My attitude changed, however, when I did a field interview with a small farmer in Portland who was generally regarded as 'de boss of farming' in his district. While recording the plants in his field, I noted that there were several calabash trees. I asked him why he had planted them and he was evasive in his response; he clearly did not want to say. This farmer was regarded in the district as a wise man. I was told on more than one occasion that no one ever stole from his field. I thought at the time that he had probably planted the trees as 'guards' against theft. We know the overlook bean (*Canavalia ensiformis*) was traditionally planted in fields for this reason but this has never been reported for the calabash. I was willing to consider this explanation, however, since 'charms' for preventing theft were made from the shell of the fruit used as a container. In the nineteenth century, for example, Phillippo [1843] noted that 'spells' and 'charms' were 'signified by the use of calabashes containing various ingredients'.

The next occasion for thinking seriously about the calabash and religious beliefs was also the result of a conversation with a small farmer from Bath, St Thomas. At the time I was studying

the cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), which in Jamaica is more associated with the spiritual realm than any other tree. I was surprised when he told me that the calabash reminded him more of 'duppies' (spirits of the dead) than did the cotton tree. He said there were many calabash trees in the Bath graveyard that were planted as grave markers. This practice was reported by Beckwith [1929 : 75] who wrote:

Wilfred says that calabash trees are often planted one at the head and one at the foot to mark the grave (and Barclay also notes this custom), but Wilfred would not admit that their presence had any significance.

When I began to ask about the planting of the calabash in graveyards, it became clear that this was a fairly well known tradition. Some said the calabash grew 'near graves' or that it was 'mostly seen in graveyards'; others referred to it specifically as a grave marker; two individuals noted that it was usually planted at the 'head' and 'foot' of the grave, and one person said it was 'used as a grave marker because the tree is hardy and does not die easily'. A study of the literature indicated that the association between the calabash and graveyards was not new. In the early nineteenth century, Barclay [1826 : 303-10] wrote, for example, that 'in the garden too, and commonly under the shade of the low out-branching calabash tree, are the graves of the family, covered with brick tombs'.

#### Spirits

In his use of oral history to understand the 'perception of slavery' in Lluiddas Vale, Craton [1977: 274] tells us that 'Miss E.R., daughter of the aged Mrs. M.R., mentioned that slave duppies were often seen where gourd trees, and "dragon's blood" and croton bushes marked the old slave burial grounds'. This suggests that the calabash was not simply a grave marker, but a marker for the location of spirits. Ryman [1980 : 5] confirms this point of view:

In St Thomas, Jamaica, some people believe that the calabash tree shelters the spirits of the dead and that its fruits contain mysterious and curative properties. Libation is offered to the spirits by sprinkling rum under the tree and on the calabashes themselves, after they have been picked. The rest of the rum may be shared by the living. The dead are of course remembered and protected by a calabash tree specially planted at the grave site.

Spirits are regarded as potentially



Andreas Oberli

Jamaican craftsmen utilize the calabash in many different ways for adornment and decoration. The tiny calabash at left, top, is used by artist June Bellew to make delicately carved and burnished purses with leather-hinged covers. The calabash at left, centre, carved all the way round with Rastafarian iconography, contrasts with the simple beauty of the purely functional object below, left, the water carrier of a St Elizabeth farmer who used a corn cob as the stopper. Note the similarity to the calabashes from the plantation era shown on p. 8, in the method of tying the 'wiss' to form the handle. The other photographs show the range of attractive calabash objects available at local crafts stands.



John R. Ashford



John R. Ashford

harmful, and they are best avoided; if they cannot be avoided, they must at least be treated with care. Given this belief, it is easy to understand why some Jamaicans see the calabash as a tree to be avoided. One informant from St Catherine (whose opinion reflected that of two others) said he had always heard when he was growing up that spirits 'live under calabash trees' and that 'you shouldn't play under calabash trees because duppy will lick you'. Another informant from Brandon Hill, St Andrew, said in all her 'experiences',

she had never 'gone near to a calabash tree'. She was told not to pick them — not even touch them — and not to play under the tree.

#### Duppy Birds

Understanding that the calabash has a relationship with the spiritual realm helps us to explain aspects of Jamaica's folklore that would otherwise seem puzzling. Consider, for example, the associating of the calabash with duppy birds. Cassidy and Le Page [1967 : 165] were told by one of their informants

that the duppy bird was 'the ground dove, which is said to frequent burial grounds, and of which it is believed that if it flies into the church, someone will die'. I believe that it is the association with graveyards that gives the ground dove its special status as a duppy bird. In fact, we could say that in general, there is a tendency to regard anything associated with graveyards as being otherworldly and spiritually potent. This is certainly true of plants such as the dragon's blood (*Cordyline terminalis*), croton (*Codiaeum variegatum*), and night-blooming jasmine (*Cestrum nocturnum*). Some people refuse to grow these plants in their home gardens because of their association with graveyards and spirits. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 'grave dirt' was frequently mentioned among the materials Obeah men and women were found to have in their possession, and it seems to have been an important ingredient in various preparations. Along similar lines is the recognition that while all cotton trees are associated with the spiritual world, those growing in graveyards are especially significant [Rashford, 1985].

The nineteenth century planter, Matthew Gregory Lewis, [1834 : 98], gives an interesting account in his journal, of African Jamaican attitudes towards graveyards, and towards the plants growing in graveyards:

Last Saturday [an African Jamaican]. . . was brought into the hospital, having fallen into epileptic fits, with which till then he had never been troubled . . . For my own part, the symptoms of his complaint were such as to make me suspect him of having tasted something poisonous, especially as, just before his first fit, he had been observed in the small grove of mangoes near the house; but I was assured by . . . **one and all, that nothing could possibly have induced him to eat an herb or fruit from the grove, as it has been used as a burying-ground for 'the white people'.** [My emphasis]. But although my idea of the poison was scouted, still the mention of burying-ground suggested another cause for his illness to [African Jamaicans] . . . , and they had no sort of doubt that in passing through the burying-ground he had been struck down by the duppy of a white person, not long deceased, whom he had formerly offended, and that these repeated fainting-fits were the consequences of that ghostly blow.

In a sense, the calabash tree is a duppy plant and it is also associated with graveyards, as we have seen. It is not surprising, therefore, to hear that it is commonly said that one should never

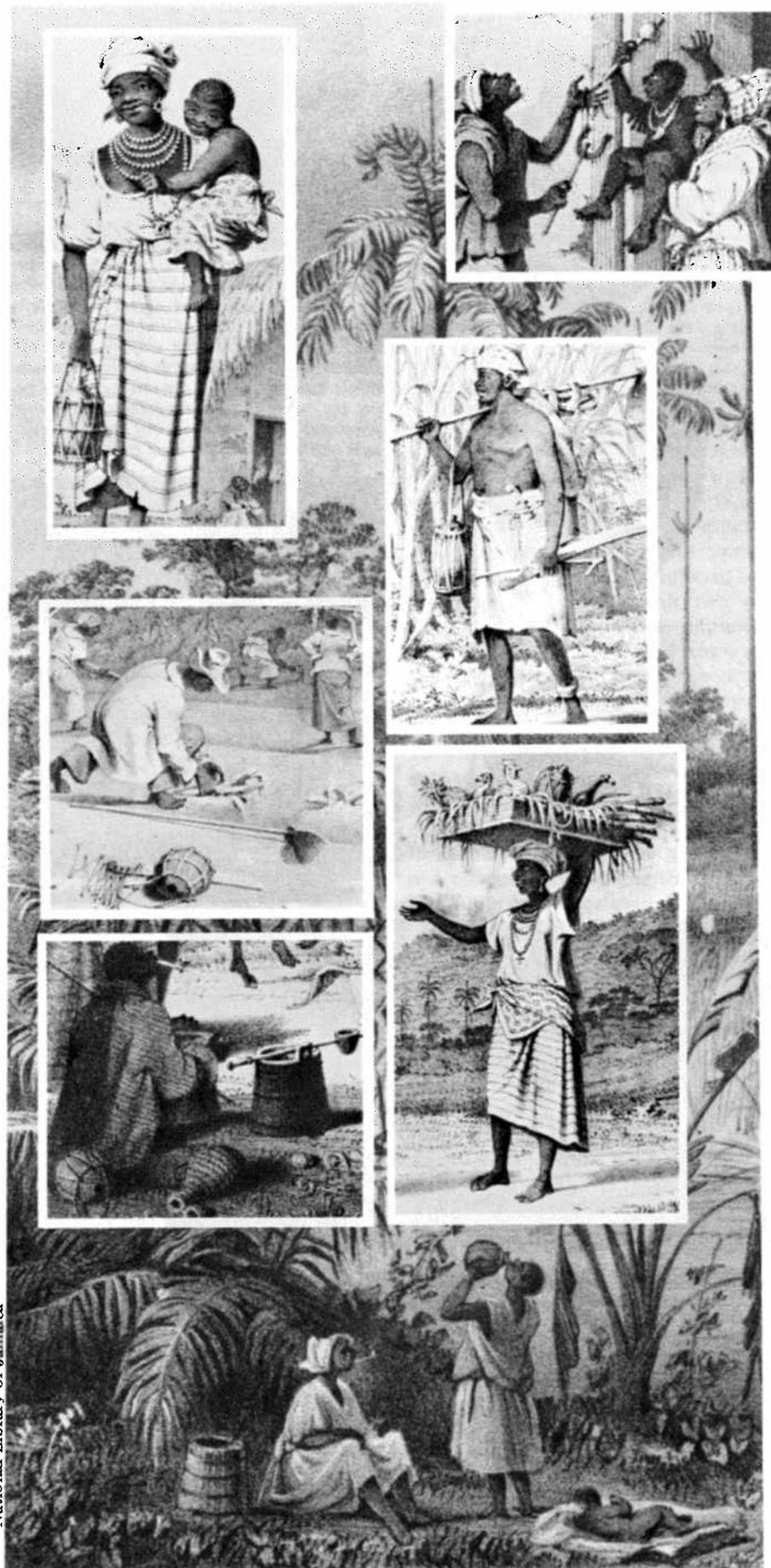
shoot birds out of calabash trees because they are duppy birds and shooting duppy birds is not without disastrous consequences. Cassidy and Le Page [1967 : 165] cite Uncle Newton who said:

Of course we are careful not to shoot 'Duppy Birds'. I nearly shot one one day . . . If I had shot that bird, I would have died.

### Conclusion

I have argued in previous articles [Rashford, 1984, 1985] that, in Jamaica, plants, animals and other things that are associated with the spiritual realm often manifest unusual, strange, tricky or mysterious characteristics. Some produce overpowering odours that can be sickeningly sweet or repulsively fetid; some have a false, imitative appearance or resemblance to things that are useful to humans – in the case of foods, most are inedible and many are poisonous. Others are the source of strange noises, or are active at night, or thrive in dark places; and yet others, for various reasons, are associated with harm, danger, sorrow, sickness, graveyards and death.

All trees associated with spirits are regarded as strange or mysterious in one or more ways. The cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), the fig tree (*Ficus* spp.) and the baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*) are giant trees with unusual appearances: The cotton tree with its massive, buttressed trunk and great out-spreading branches; the strangler fig with its predatory behaviour and its dense tangle of adventitious roots descending from the trunk and branches; and the giant baobab with its bizarre appearance, and its showy, night-blooming, bat-pollinated, upside-down flowers that produce a very offensive odour. Duppy chocho (*Morinda citrifolia*), duppy coconut (*Barringtonia asiatica*), duppy soursop (*Annona montana*), duppy cherry (*Cordia alliodora*) and duppy rice-and-peas (*Pithecellobium unguis-cati*) are all trees bearing inedible fruits, some of which are poisonous; these fruits are similar in appearance or in some other respect to edible fruits which they are said to resemble or imitate. The otaheite apple (*Syzygium malaccense*) is associated with spirits because its dense, dark foliage provides an ideal habitat for birds (including the true owls) which Jamaicans call patoo, and these birds are associated with spirits. The bamboo's association with the supernatural comes from its unusual appearance as an enormous, fast-



National Library of Jamaica

The ubiquitous 'packy': Details of prints from the plantation era show how important the calabash was as an everyday object.

growing, tree-like grass. It forms thick shaded clumps that emit a curious sound as the wind rustles the long slender leaves, and the hollow stems amplify the creaking sound which is produced when they rub against each other (according to Cassidy and Le Page [1980], 'bamboo bed' identifies 'a rickety bed that creaks like bamboos in the wind'). The jack fruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) derives its association from the unusual appearance of the large fruits weighing up to seventy pounds that grow along its trunk and branches. These fruits give off a very strong odour that many find offensive.

What is remarkable about the calabash is that it is associated with the spiritual realm for most of the reasons mentioned above. It too is unusual in appearance; like the jack fruit, it has large fruits that hang conspicuously from the trunk and branches. Like the baobab, it also produces bat-pollinated flowers that bloom at night and have a fetid odour which Lunan [1814:40] described as a 'cadaverous, nauseous, and intolerable stench'. We have seen that the calabash is associated with death in a number of ways: it serves as a grave marker; it is grown both in 'remembrance' of the dead and to 'protect' the dead [Ryman, 1980]; and it is one of several plants that are used to keep (or to 'plant') spirits in their graves. Throwing parched peas in the grave, or planting a shrub upside down in the grave, or placing a branch of the cotton tree on the coffin are all practices done to accomplish the same objective. We should also remember that the early accounts of Jamaican funeral rites indicate that the fruit was often used as a ritual container for food and drink [Sloane, 1707; Leslie, 1739; Scott, 1836]. Sometimes this food and drink would be poured from the container into the grave or buried in the grave along with the container. At other times they were spilled on the grave or left in calabashes placed at the head and foot of the grave. The calabash was probably also associated with funerals as a musical instrument; this would especially be true of the calabash shaker.

Finally, the significance of the calabash in Jamaica's folk tradition points to its association with the spiritual realm. We have already noted the use of the fruit as a container for making charms and the belief that the tree should be avoided. There are other such ideas that can be readily identified. June

Bellew is an Irish artist who has lived and worked in Jamaica since 1978. One of the many things she does is to make handbags from calabash. She told me that the people in Golden Spring advised her not to work on calabashes at night, the implication being that she would suffer some harm if she did. She was never able to learn the reason for this warning. Another curious belief is that a calabash stick placed on a grave and then used to hit someone will make him 'crippled for life'. Related to this association between calabash sticks and graves is the use of calabash branches in a ritual intended to make contact with spirits which can then be used to do one's bidding. For example, Beckwith [1929:136] presents two ways in which this is said to be done, one of which involves the use of calabash branches:

To secure the duppy, you should go to a graveyard at night and visit the grave of some friend or some member of your family, preferably your mother. Take an egg, rice, and rum, and mash the egg at the grave. The duppy will come up and feed upon the egg and the food which you bring; thus you pay him to help you. To call up a ghost to set him upon another, Sam Thompson recommended the following method: Get two wide-mouthed bottles of proof rum (alcohol) and a bunch of spiritweed tied to a stick, and go naked to the grave at night. At twelve o'clock you go to the gravehead, put the rum at the head, strike one, two, three strokes with the spiritweed, and say: 'So-and-so, come an' mek a tell you wha, fe do.' Repeat this at the foot. Then 'guard the head' and take up the bottle, guard the foot and take up the bottle, and tell the ghost what you want of it. He will start upon his errand, . . . In Westmoreland a similar method is employed, but the beating of the grave is done with calabash switches.

While this discussion has focused on the usefulness of the calabash tree and its relationship to spirits and duppy birds, it is really part of a much broader effort aimed at understanding the underlying coherence of African-Jamaican belief, and African-Caribbean belief in general. Even though it has been known for a long time that plants are a crucial part of this belief system, very few studies have been done. Yet, as I have tried to show, this is a subject worthy of serious attention. 'We must realize', as Beckwith [1929:116] has argued, 'that the whole structure built up by the Obeah men rested upon the basis of very ancient beliefs in the relation between man and natural objects.' In the relation between Jamaicans and

'natural objects', Beckwith tells us, 'plant life is alive with spirit'.

## Notes

1. It is important to keep in mind that in many written accounts of 'gourds' or 'calabashes', especially some of the earlier sources, it is often difficult, if not impossible to tell the specific plant that it being discussed. This is particularly true of tropical America where both the fruit from the calabash tree and the bottle gourd have a long history of similar uses, often in the same community [Heiser, 1979].
2. The value of the calabash for growing orchids has long been recognized [Marshall, 1939:177; Williams and Williams, 1951:138]; Yeaton [1982:137] notes 'The . . . tree is an ideal epiphyte host because its soft, deep bark provides easy anchorage for epiphytes and recesses for humus accumulations'.
3. We should also note here Ryman's [1980] report that a cold remedy is made not only from the pulp but from the leaves which are used for a tea. Asprey and Thornton [1953:38] note the pulp is 'considered purgative' and they also indicate that it is used as a poultice. Long [1774:752] says this poultice is used to treat burns. According to Lunan [1814:40], however, a poultice made by roasting a young fruit and applying the pulp was used to treat 'bruises' and 'inflammations'.

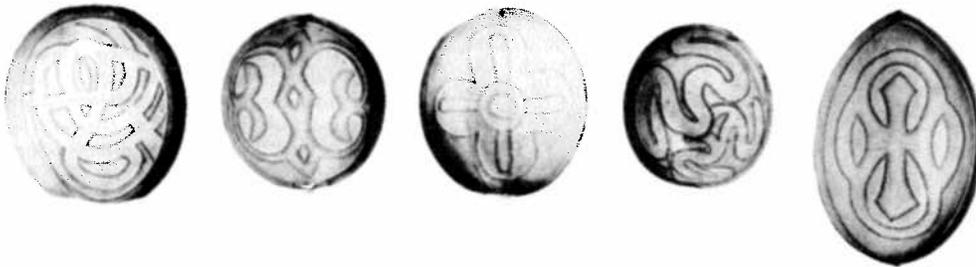
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Left: Carved calabashes by the Maroons of Suriname. (From *Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest* by Sally and Richard Price. University of California Press, 1980.)

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