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Cover Illustration: Marble and agate lobby
floor at Grand Lido Hotel, Negril.

Cover Photograph: A. R. D. Porter

Africa's famous baobab tree is a prominent member of the genus Andansonia, a small group of tropical trees that includes seven species native to Madagascar and one to Australia (Wickens 1982). Much has been written about this symbol of Africa since it was first systematically described in the 1750s, and its image now appears on coins, paper currency, stamps, and postcards (Steffens 1984, Asch 1968, Thebaud 1984).



Figure 1. The baobab at Alpha Boys' School.

The baobab is rare in Jamaica. Though introduced some two hundred years ago, it remains unknown to most Jamaicans (Adams 1972, Powell 1972). I found only four trees in 1987 when I published the results of my effort to document the history and cultural importance of this species in Jamaica.¹ Since then, one has died and eight new trees have been identified. This article discusses these developments. It also includes a map of Jamaica's baobabs, (Fig. 2) photographs of the trees identified since 1987, six drawings showing the variation in the size and shape of fruits from the only two bearing trees, and a table that brings together information for all known baobabs in the island with details of their status, size, flowering, fruiting and uses.

The Baobab at Alpha Boys' School

Jamaicans knew Alex Hawkes through his *Daily Gleaner* column that often dealt with the island's flora. Hawkes first became aware of Jamaica's baobabs when he learned that the small tree in Kingston, at the intersection of Old Hope Road and Munroe Road (above the Mountain View gully), was threatened by construction (Fig. 3). The tree was brought to his attention in a letter from C. Bernard Lewis, then Director of the Institute of Jamaica. Hawkes made 'a plea to preserve' this tree, describing it in his April 16, 1970 column as 'presumably the only example of the African Baobab in all of Jamaica'.

This priceless tree, certainly is unique, and an example of Jamaica's African heritage, it's 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!

Reader response later indicated that there were not one, but six baobabs in Jamaica.

One of the letters Hawkes received

identified two baobabs in Kingston at the Convent of Mercy Academy (Alpha) School. The letter was from Bill du Mont, who was identified by Hawkes (1970b) as 'Games Master at the institution'. It indicated that one of the trees was at the Boys' School and the other at the Girls' School. The tree at the Alpha Boys' School (Fig. 1) was the second largest baobab in Jamaica, and this is what I wrote about it in 1987:

In his [May 21, 1970] article [in the *Daily Gleaner*], Hawkes said the tree at the Boys' School was a small one, but it was not. I was surprised to see an enormous tree some sixty feet tall that was thirty-three feet in circumference measured at three and one-half feet from the ground. This is one of the largest baobabs I have seen in the Caribbean.

Africa's Baobab Tree in Jamaica

by John Rashford



Figure 3. The baobab at Munroe Road.

Sister Marie Therese who is in charge of the Boys' School, said when she first arrived in 1939 it was already a large tree. Unfortunately, a good third of the tree that 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 fruit, the pulp and seeds of which they eat. . .'. 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 way, is called 'seaway lash'. When I saw the tree on June 5, it was full of new leaves but there were no fruits, due perhaps to the fact that the boys had eaten 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.

This baobab is now dead. When I saw it on August 8, 1989, there were still decaying branches on the ground, but this time they were scattered around a rotting trunk. In early January or February 1989, Sister Ignatius said:

We noticed it wasn't looking that good but we didn't know what was the complaint. It started drying up from the trunk. We noticed that it was getting corroded, you might say, and the leaves started withering; and then the branches started falling off. On night, we heard a terrible crash about 10:30 p.m. and one half of it fell off. After that half fell off we cut it down.

The baobab's shade had kept the print shop cool, said Sister Ignatius, but 'now it is unbearably hot.' The effect of the loss of this baobab's shade is immediate. This is not true of some of its other uses which, even if unrecognized, were an important part of the tradition at Alpha Boy's School. The four baobabs I wrote about in 1987 all produced flowers, but only the trees at Munroe Road,

Hopefield Avenue and the Alpha Boys' School bore fruit.

The magnificent tree at Alpha Girls' School is Jamaica's oldest and largest Baobab, measuring 48 feet (16 metres) in circumference at one foot above the ground (Fig. 4.) It produces an abundance of flowers² from the late spring through the early autumn but fruits rarely develop. After visiting this tree in May, 1970, Hawkes wrote, 'Mr du Mont informs me that it flowers profusely, and that the extraordinary blossoms are frequently used as subjects in the school's art'. Hawkes said nothing of the fruits. Vanessa Soares (1977), a former student at Alpha Girls' School, provides further evidence that the fruits did not develop. She wrote in the first issue of *Hibiscus*, the school's newspaper:

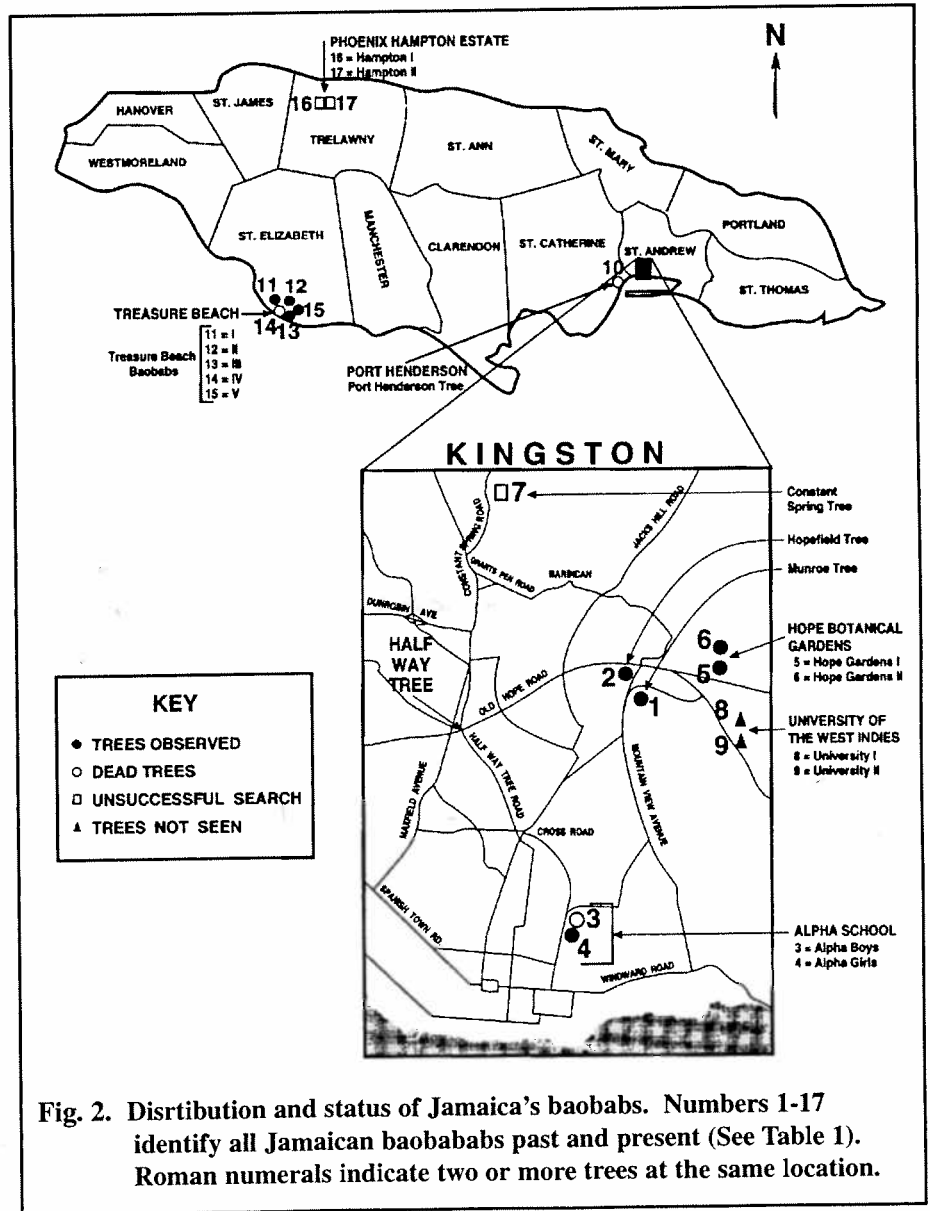


Fig. 2. Distribution and status of Jamaica's baobabs. Numbers 1-17 identify all Jamaican baobabs past and present (See Table 1). Roman numerals indicate two or more trees at the same location.

During the year at intervals, the tree blooms beautiful white flowers which later wither and turn a brown colour. *They later fall off the tree along with their stems* [my emphasis] and are used to make various decorations.

My research confirms this absence of fruit. Students and staff at the Girls' School, including the gardener and the watchmen, were unfamiliar with the fruit. During an interview with one of the watchmen, he pointed to flower buds as the fruit. Unlike the flower, there were no school traditions that indicated familiarity with the fruit.

Of the three bearing trees, only the fruit from the tree at Alpha Boys' School were eaten. The fruits from the Munroe Road tree fall to the ground where they escape notice on the bushy hillside of the Mountain View gully [Fig. 3]. I have collected fruits from under this tree on several occasions, and Hawkes (1970a) published a photograph of a fruit he found under this tree.³ The fruits of the Hopefield Avenue tree (Fig. 5), which grows in a front yard ornamental garden, are swept up and burned by the gardener. He said no one ate them and that he did not know they could be eaten. In fact, he remained stubbornly sceptical when I said they could be eaten. It can be said, then, that the students at Alpha Boys' School have lost much more than just an unusual tradition with which it was associated. Insofar as they ate the fruit, they have lost an important aspect of their immediate environment, and a unique tradition with which it was associated.

Baobabs at Hope Botanical Gardens

In 1987 when I reviewed the literature on baobabs in Jamaica, I mentioned Edwin Atkins of Boston. In 1900, he established a garden in Cuba on his plantation at Soledad, near Cienfuegos. Grey and Hubbard (1933) studied this garden and noted the presence of baobab trees. Especially interesting was their report that the trees had grown from seeds acquired from Jamaica on three occasions. In 1907 seeds were sent by D. Houghes, and in 1908 by both D. Houghes and R. Cameron. In 1987 I thought it interesting that although baobab seedlings were grown for sale in Jamaica in the 1880s, and seeds were sent to Edwin Atkins's garden in Cuba



Figure 5. The baobab at Hopefield Avenue.



Figure 4. Benches built around the lower trunk of the baobab at Alpha Girls' School



Figure 6. The baobab at the entrance to Hope Botanical Gardens (Hope Gardens I).

(and perhaps elsewhere), not a single baobab was to be found in any of Jamaica's botanic gardens today.

I was confident in saying this in 1987 because I had looked for baobabs in Jamaica's botanic gardens without success. When I first began this study, I anticipated finding baobabs in the botanic gardens because of published reports and the information received through correspondence. For example, in the 1885 Annual Report of the Public Gardens and Plantations, D. Morris, then Director of Public Gardens and Plantations, included 'baobab tree bark' in 'a list of medicinal specimens prepared by [the] . . . Department and forwarded to the late [World] Exhibition at New Orleans.' There was also a list of fruit trees grown for sale in the botanic gardens published in the September 1887 Bulletin of the Botanical Department (No. 3). Baobabs were on the list and could be purchased for three pennies each.

I was further encouraged to search the botanic gardens when, in response to my inquiry about baobabs in Jamaica, I received an informative letter from George Proctor, who is well known for his knowledge of Caribbean flora:

I have seen several of these trees in Jamaica, at least two in Kingston. One of these is fairly conspicuous, just across the gully from Old Hope Road just below the intersection of Wellington Drive . . . The other tree is just west of Hopefield Avenue about 150 yards or so south of its junction with Hope Road. There may be one at King's House or Hope Gardens but if so I have not seen them.

I reported in 1987 that I did find the tree at the intersection of Old Hope Road and Munroe Road (just before Munroe Road becomes Wellington Drive), and the tree at Hopefield Avenue (thanks to Hawkes's column) but my search at Kings House and at Hope Botanical Gardens was unsuccessful. It turns out, however, that I was wrong about baobabs in Jamaica's botanic gardens.

On July 31, 1989, I was surprised to discover a small baobab alongside the entrance of Hope Botanical Gardens (Fig. 6). It was 7 feet 8 inches (2.33



Figure 7. The baobab at the Nursery of Hope Botanical Gardens (Hope Gardens II).

metres) in circumference, measured at 2 feet (60 cm) from the ground.⁴ The top had been torn off by Hurricane Gilbert which devastated the island on September 12, 1988. Now the tree was covered with a thick flush of new leaves on the many small branches that had sprung up since then. The tree had termite trails on the trunk, and several columns of ants made their way to the leaf-bearing branches. The trunk was covered with markings such as 'Sis was here' and 'Joan and Orville' and there was also the usual drawing of a heart pierced by an arrow. The baobab is conspicuous and that, together with its broad trunk and soft bark, seems to provide a convenient place for people to leave messages by writing, drawing or painting on the tree or by attaching posters and other signs. This use of the baobab as a communications centre has often been noted in the literature, and similar markings have been used to trace the movements of early European travellers in Africa and Australia (Guy 1967).

On December 29, 1993, I sought out the gardeners at Hope Botanical Gardens. One of them, I thought, might know something about this small baobab at the entrance to the garden. I spoke to two retired gardeners who have been at Hope since the 1950s and were now independent guides for tourists. Neither of them knew of the baobab, but they said Newton Holness, a

retired Area Extension Officer for Hope Botanical Gardens, could help. I met with Newton Holness on December 21, 1993. While he provided no additional information on the young baobab at the main entrance, I did learn of another tree in the nursery of Hope Botanical Gardens (Fig.7).

This baobab was about 30 to 35 feet tall (10-11 metres) and 11 feet 9 inches (just over a metre) in circumference, measured at 1 foot 6 inches (50 cm) from the ground. It grew at the base of a huge flamboyant tree (*Delonix regia*) and a mahogany (*Swietenia mahagoni*). The branches of all three were intermingled. The baobab leaned noticeably to the southeast. Holness said it had been perfectly upright before Hurricane Gilbert in 1988.



Figures 8a & 8b. Baobabs at Treasure Beach (Treasure Beach I & II).

Baobabs at Treasure Beach

Olive Senior told me in August of 1988 that Andreas Oberli (a contributor to the JAMAICA JOURNAL of which she was then editor), said he had two baobab seedlings, and that there were four trees at or near Treasure Beach in the parish of St Elizabeth. She said he knew the tree

well, and had photographed one or more at Treasure Beach. I did not mention these in 1987 because of my decision not to write about trees I had not seen unless I was convinced my informant was genuinely familiar with the tree. I adopted this policy because there were many occasions in the Virgin Islands and Jamaica when I was directed to baobabs only to discover that they were cotton trees (*Ceiba pentandra*). In fact, I started studying baobabs in the Caribbean in 1983 because of my experience in Antigua when I went with colleagues to locate cotton trees and twice ended up at baobabs instead.



Figure 9. At Treasure Beach (Treasure Beach III).

Figure 10. At Treasure Beach (Treasure Beach V).



I decided to search for the Treasure Beach baobabs, since the information came from a reliable source. At 7.30 a.m. on December 19, 1993, I left Kingston for St Elizabeth, Jamaica's largest parish, famous for its beauty and its traditional small farming that supplies island markets with such produce as watermelons, carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, scallion, thyme and onions. I headed first for Treasure Beach Hotel, since the trees were reported to be at or near there. This small hotel, for which the earliest construction began about 1937, fronts the best part of the beach that forms Calabash Bay. The hotel is actually located in Frenchman District, but today the whole area is known as Treasure Beach.

I arrived at the hotel at noon. As I made my way through the lobby, I met Portia Daley, a native of St Elizabeth and a receptionist at the hotel. I told her that I had heard there were baobab trees on the grounds or near the hotel and I wanted to locate them. I was pleasantly surprised when she said there was one. She could not remember exactly where it was on the property, but she would take me to find it. We went to the north end of the hotel grounds where there was a small construction site just south of a long building of guest rooms and there we found two baobab trees.

The larger one (Treasure Beach I), the first baobab I saw there (Fig. 8a), was 7 feet 6 inches (2.25 metres) in circumference, measured at 1 foot (30 cm) from the ground. The small tree next to it (Treasure Beach II) had a slender trunk 3 feet 6 inches (about 1 metre) in circumference, also measured at 1 foot above ground (Fig. 8b). Both were healthy trees in full leaf, though crowded on the north side by a huge guinep tree that had limited the development of the baobab branches in that direction.

I was surprised when Portia said that neither of these was the tree she knew and suggested we continue our search. As we walked on a path that took us down the hillside towards the pool, a magnificent grove of sabal palms, and the beach beyond, we saw the baobab along the path not far from the pool. This wind-swept tree (Treasure Beach III) was 7 feet 6 inches (2.25 metres) in circumference at 1 foot (30 cm) from the ground and about 20 to 25 feet (7 metres) tall (Fig. 9). Like the two baobabs at the construction site, it was also a healthy tree full of green leaves.

While Portia and I were sitting by the pool talking about the Treasure Beach baobabs, we were joined by Donovan Bernard. He had been working at the hotel for over ten years and was responsible for the care of the facilities and grounds. Donovan said there were two other trees. One, which had died in 1991 (Treasure Beach IV), was not far from the two trees at the construction site. The other tree (Treasure Beach V) was at the entrance to the hotel a short distance from the main gate (Fig. 10). The tree that died had divided into twin trunks about a foot above ground and it was hollow. 'A big piece broke out from the side,' said Donovan, 'and then it died. It just fell down.' The tree at the gate, that serves as the hotel's signpost, was also a healthy tree in full leaf. At 1 foot 6 inches (50 cm) from the ground it was 8 feet



Figure 11. Cotton tree at Hampton School, by the biology lab.

(2.5 metres) in circumference. Donovan said the tree that died was as big as the one at the gate.

The baobab, from a practical point of view, is primarily valued in Jamaica as a shade tree. This significance is particularly true of the tree at the entrance to the hotel where people gather in its shade by the roadside as they wait for transportation. The limited value placed on the tree in Jamaica is in stark contrast to Africa where there are many uses for all parts of the tree, serving the most important areas

of daily life. The leaves are eaten, used medicinally, and fed to animals. The same is true of the pulp and seeds of the fruit. The bark is used for making baskets, cordage, snares and a variety of other things. The stored water in the baobab's massive trunk is precious in the hot, dry places to which the tree is native. And the baobab is also a honey tree, since bees often establish their hives in hollow baobabs. Given its usefulness, it is easy to understand why there have long been reports in the scientific literature of the baobab's close association with human settlement in Africa (Dalziel 1937, Owen 1970, Rashford 1987b).

While Portia, Donovan and I were sitting at the pool side, I took the opportunity to ask about the Treasure Beach baobabs. Both said they had never seen the trees flower nor had they noticed any fruit. Portia said there were many questions from visitors about the trees. Donovan explained it was mostly Jamaican guests who asked about the baobabs, and what they wanted to know most was whether they were cotton trees. 'They always wonder,' he said, 'how come all the trees are labelled and these were not'. He added, 'Foreigners mostly ask about the name of it'. Because baobabs are deciduous, shedding their leaves in the winter dry season, both Jamaican and foreign visitors wanted to know 'why the tree died' when they saw them at that time of year.

Portia learned of baobabs while attending Hampton School for Girls in Malvern, a small town about 2400 feet (800m) up in the beautiful Santa Cruz Mountains, some twenty miles northeast of Treasure Beach Hotel. She said there was a large tree right in front of her biology classroom and her biology teacher had told her it was a baobab. She was always interested in that tree, she told me, and that is why she remembered the name. I asked about its flowering and fruiting, and she said she had never seen it bear flowers or fruit. Since Hampton School was not far from Treasure Beach Hotel, I decided to go and see this tree when I left Treasure Beach.

I arrived at Hampton at about 3.00 p.m. and met Gloria Vernal and Inez Edwards who were House Mothers there. Gloria Vernal explained the layout of the school and accompanied me to the biology classroom. Here was another big surprise! The expected baobab turned out to be a large cotton tree (Fig. 11).⁵

Baobabs of the University of the West Indies

I have already mentioned that Olive Senior told me Andreas Oberli had two baobab seedlings. I wrote to him on August 31, 1988, to learn about these seedlings but heard nothing more.

However, on December 23, 1993, Dr Aubrey Jacobs and I went to visit Professor Sidrak of the Botany Department of the University of the West Indies at Mona. I told him that I was researching baobabs in Jamaica, and he mentioned the trees at Alpha School. He said he had asked the Sisters to germinate some seeds for him, and these were the two seedlings which Andreas Oberli had. Although the Alpha Boys' School baobab is now dead, it is noteworthy that there are at least two seedlings somewhere in Jamaica that are the offspring of this tree.

Conclusion

The history and cultural significance of Jamaica's baobabs is a small but important part of the human dispersal of this species in the tropical and subtropical regions of the New World (Rashford 1987a, 1991, 1994). The need for such information is recognized in the scientific literature (Wickens 1982). For example, Armstrong (1984:160-161), notes, '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 concludes: '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.'

This paper fills the gap for Jamaica. I have now documented twelve baobabs in Jamaica (Table 1). Based on a review of

the literature and field research, I still believe there are more baobabs in Jamaica yet to be identified. I am convinced, however, we will never be able to agree with Macfayden (1850) in saying the tree is 'frequently to be met with.' After some two hundred years, the baobab is still a rare tree in Jamaica.

In the nineteenth century, Grisebach (1868:88) described the baobab as 'only a cultivated tree in the West Indies' and this remains true today (Cook and Collins 1903:68, Little *et al.* 1974:524-6). Unlike many other introduced plants that are now widespread in Jamaica because they readily spring up from discarded seeds, for example, tamarind [*Tamarindus indica*], almond [*terminalia catappa*], mango [*Mangifera indica*] and ackee [*Blighia sapida*]), the baobab will never become common unless it is planted. Given its remarkable appearance and many uses, especially its tasty,

Table 1. A Summary of Jamaica's Baobabs

TREE	S	G	AGE	FL	FR	FR-U	SH
1. Munroe Tree	●	9	40	y	y	n	y
2. Hopefield Tree	●	12.1	60	y	y	n	y
3. Alpha Boys	○	33	100	y	y	y	y
4. Alpha Girls	●	48	200	y	?	?	y
5. Hope Gardens I	●	7.8	40	?	-	-	y
6. Hope Gardens II	●	11.3	50	?	-	-	y
7. Constant Spring	□	-	-	-	-	-	-
8. University I	▲	-	10	n	-	-	n
9. University II	▲	-	10	n	-	-	n
10. Port Henderson	○	-	-	-	-	-	-
11. Treasure Beach I	●	8	40	?	?	-	n
12. Treasure Beach II	●	4	40	?	-	-	n
13. Treasure Beach III	●	7.6	40	?	?	-	y
14. Treasure Beach IV	○	?	40	?	?	-	y
15. Treasure Beach V	●	8	40	?	?	-	y
16. Phoenix Hampden I	□	-	-	-	-	-	-
17. Phoenix Hampden II	□	-	-	-	-	-	-

S = Status; G = Girth in feet; Age = estimated age Fl = Flower; Fr = Fruit; Fr-U = Fruit is used; SH = Shade.

● Trees Observed
○ Dead Trees
□ Unsuccessful Search
▲ Trees not seen

y = yes; n = no; ? = uncertain; - = information

nutritious fruit, the baobab deserves wider cultivation. The three fruits I collected from the Hopefield Avenue tree and the three from the Munroe Road tree (Fig. 12) were given to Professor Sidrak. He promises to germinate the seeds, some of which will be planted on the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies. I hope one will also be planted at Alpha Boys' School.⁶

Acknowledgements

I thank the individuals mentioned in the text for their cooperation and patience, and Aubrey Jacobs whose support made this project possible. I also thank my colleagues Brad Huber, Dana Cope, and George Dickinson for helpful editorial comments.

Notes

1. Owen presents a good discussion of the uses of the tree in Africa (1970) and its ecology (1974). An excellent overall summary of what is known about the tree is presented by Wickens (1982).
2. I recorded the flowering of this tree on three occasions. On June 5, 1986, it was in the early stages of flowering because there were many buds on the tree and only a few open flowers on the tree and on the ground. On August 8, 1988, it was in full flowering with many buds and open flowers on the tree and many flowers on the ground. On August 10, 1989, a year after Hurricane Gilbert had severely pruned the tree, there were again many buds and flowers on the tree and on the ground. On June 10, 1986 when I interviewed Sister Irene who was then the art teacher, she said it was in September and October that a lot of flowers fell to the ground.
3. In a brief discussion of the flowering and fruiting of the Munroe baobab, Hawkes (1970a) wrote: "The fact that the tree does produce fruit is interesting, indicating the possibility that some of our Jamaican 'rat-bats' have had a hand in its pollination, and perhaps we can raise some seedlings from fully mature pods, the one shown in the picture having been shaken off the tree in an immature state by the action of the bulldozers, it seems." While I support the effort Hawkes made to save the Munroe baobab, bulldozers were probably not responsible for the fruit he collected from under the tree. The baobab begins flowering in the spring or early summer, and continues into the early fall, producing fruits which fall from the tree in the late winter and through the spring and summer. Sometimes maturing fruits can be seen on a tree mingled with the ripe fruits from the previous season.
4. As in my 1987 article, the height of the trees presented in this paper are estimates, but their circumference (and the distance from the ground at which they are measured) was determined by the use of a tape measure.
5. I had a similar experience in June of 1988 when I drove from Kingston to Mt Alvernia High School in Montego Bay where I was told there were two large baobab trees. These were also cotton trees.
6. I welcome any additional information on the location and cultural importance of baobab trees in Jamaica. This information can be sent to the JAMAICA JOURNAL or directly to me at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina, 29424.

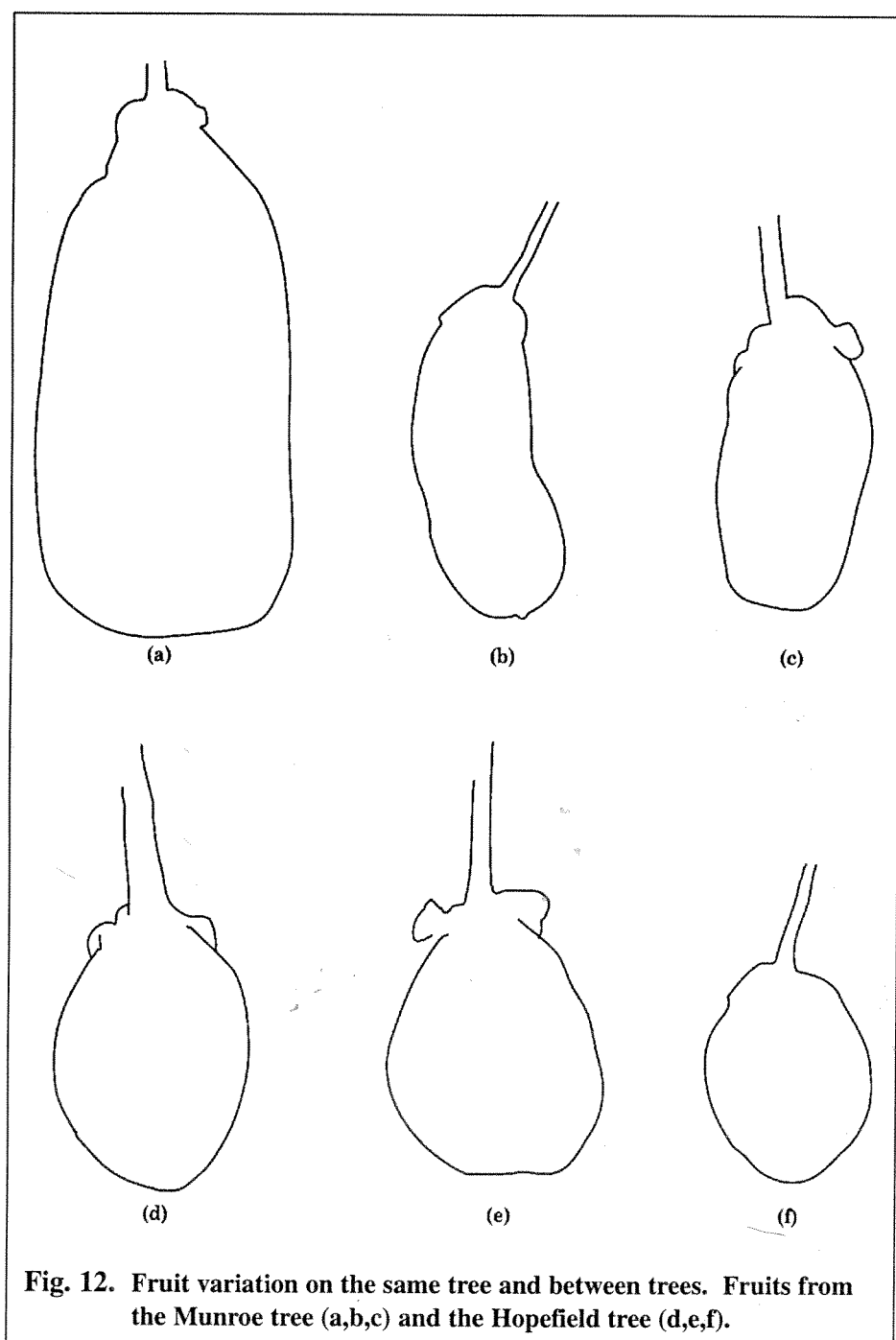


Fig. 12. Fruit variation on the same tree and between trees. Fruits from the Munroe tree (a,b,c) and the Hopefield tree (d,e,f).

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