

AFRICA'S BAOBAB TREE: WHY MONKEY NAMES?

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ABSTRACT.—*Monkey bread* and *monkey tamarind* are two of the common names that appear in published accounts of Africa's well-known baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata* L.). These *monkey* names are generally assumed to be derived from the simple fact that monkeys eat the baobab's fruit. Although this literal interpretation seems obvious, it is neither the only one, nor is it necessarily the correct one. In the Caribbean, the use of monkey in the compound common names for the baobab and other plants implies imitation. The name monkey tamarind, for example, indicates that the baobab is like the tamarind tree (*Tamarindus indica* L.). It mimics the tamarind just as a monkey does a human. This is consistent with what we find in other parts of the world where the baobab is also identified as a kind of tamarind, though without the name monkey.

RESUMEN.—*Pan de mono* y *tamarindo de mono* son dos de los nombres comunes que aparecen en las publicaciones acerca del conocido árbol africano llamado baobab (*Adansonia digitata* L.). Generalmente se da por sentado que estos nombres de *mono* se derivan del simple hecho que los monos comen el fruto del baobab. Si bien esta interpretación literal parece obvia, no es la única ni es necesariamente la correcta. En el Caribe, el uso de mono en los nombres compuestos del baobab y de otras plantas implica la imitación. El nombre tamarindo de mono, por ejemplo, indica que el baobab es como el árbol de tamarindo (*Tamarindus indica* L.). Simula al tamarindo tanto como el mono remeda a un humano. Esto es consistente con lo que encontramos en otras partes del mundo donde al baobab también se le identifica como un tipo de tamarindo, aunque sin el nombre de mono.

RÉSUMÉ.—*Monkey bread* et *monkey tamarind* sont deux des noms les plus communs qui apparaissent dans les publications sur l'arbre d'Afrique bien connu, le baobab (*Adansonia digitata* L.). Ces noms de *monkey* sont généralement prétendus être dérivés du simple fait que le singe mange le fruit du baobab. Bien que cette interprétation littérale semble évidente, ce n'est ni la seule, ni nécessairement la plus acceptable. Aux Caraïbes l'utilisation du *monkey* comme nom courant composé pour le baobab et d'autres plantes implique la notion d'imitation. Le nom *monkey tamarind*, par exemple, indique que le baobab est en quelque sorte similaire à l'arbre de tamarind (*Tamarindus indica* L.); il imiterait ou mimiquerait tel un singe un humain. C'est en accord avec ce que nous trouvons dans d'autres parties du monde où, bien que le nom *monkey* ne soit pas utilisé, le baobab est également identifié comme une espèce de tamarind.

INTRODUCTION

Why does Africa's baobab tree have monkey names? While it is generally assumed that the baobab (*Adansonia digitata* L.) is called *monkey bread* and *monkey tamarind* because monkeys eat its fruit, there is an alternative—and more plausible—explanation.¹ In the Caribbean, there is a far richer meaning to the use of the word *monkey* in the compound common names for the baobab and other plants, and for other things as well. Put simply, we learn that the thing whose specific name is monkey bears a resemblance—often a “ridiculous” resemblance—to the thing identified in the second half of the compound common name. The baobab is called monkey tamarind in the Caribbean not because monkeys eat the fruit, but because the fruit is very similar in taste to that of the true tamarind (*Tamarindus indica* L.). This explanation offers an entirely different perspective on the meaning of the baobab's monkey names.

The African baobab is the most prominent member of the small, well defined tropical genus *Adansonia*, of which there are an additional seven species in Madagascar and one in Australia (Wickens 1982). It is one of the continent's most unusual trees, readily distinguished by its huge bulging trunk, which seems strangely disproportionate to the tree's moderate height and thick, rapidly tapering branches (Fig. 1–3). The baobab's size testifies to its remarkable ability to store water, making it ideally suited to the dry open or wooded savannas of tropical Africa (Owen 1974). Because of human dispersal, the tree now grows worldwide. It 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 (Vaid 1978; Wickens 1982; Rashford 1987, 1991) (Fig 4, 5).

THE COMMON-SENSE EXPLANATION FOR
THE NAME MONKEY BREAD

While monkey bread is one of the baobab's most frequently reported common names, appearing in many dictionaries, only a few authors have offered an explanation for its origin and meaning.² These authors favor the explanation that seems self-evident: the tree is called monkey bread because monkeys eat its fruit. In some cases this is stated explicitly. Owen (1974:90–91), for example, reports that “The name . . . is related to the habit of monkeys, particularly baboons, relishing the fruit which they either pluck from the tree or pick up from the ground.” Dellatola (1983:27) states, “The baobab fruit, commonly known as monkey bread, is a favorite food of baboons, hence the name.” Robyns (1980:68) takes a similar position by noting, “monkeys are very fond of the capsules, hence the English vernacular name, Monkey Bread Tree.”

The association between the baobab's common names and primate fruit consumption is implicit in other sources. In *The Random House Dictionary* (1968:862), for example, monkey bread is defined as “the gourd-like fruit of the baobab, eaten by monkeys,” and the name for “the tree itself.” *Funk and Wagnalls New “Standard” Dictionary* (1958:1602) provides a similar definition. Monkey bread refers to “the baobab tree, or its fruits” and the fruit “is eaten by man as well as by monkeys.”

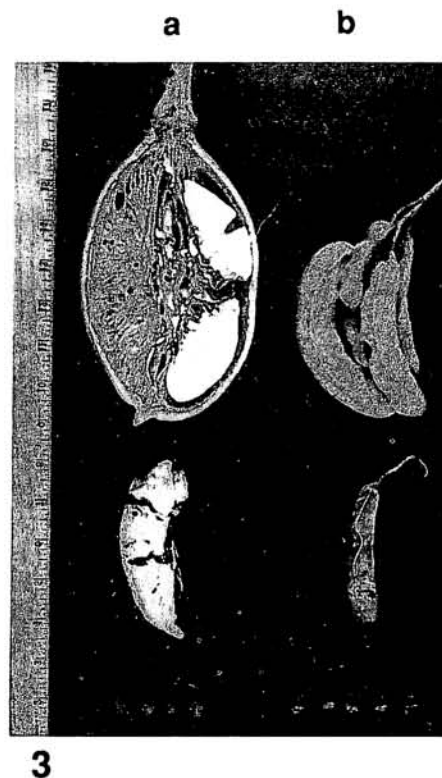


FIG. 1, 2.—Baobab at the Convent of Mercy Academy (Alpha) Girls School in Kingston, Jamaica;
FIG. 3.—A comparison of the fruits of the baobab (a) and tamarind (b).



FIG. 4.—A live baobab stump not far from Parham, Antigua.



FIG. 5.—Two fallen trees on the grounds of the University of Florida's Research and Education Center in Homestead, FL.

According to Porteous (1928:235), "the fruit, large, oval, and resembling a cucumber, is a great favorite with monkeys, the tree being sometimes called Ape's-bread Tree [and] Monkey's Bread."

Published accounts implicitly or explicitly link monkey foraging to the plant's common name. Yet, this explanation may not be the only one, nor is it necessarily the correct one. The alternative—and more plausible—explanation this paper offers for the baobab's monkey names is discussed in relationship to the name monkey tamarind which occurs in the Caribbean.

MONKEY TAMARIND—A CARIBBEAN NAME

I have been mapping the Caribbean distribution of the baobab over the past seven years to learn something about its history and cultural significance in the region. In Jamaica, there are five trees in Kingston, the island's capital, and there are reliable reports of three more in the parish of St. Elizabeth. Published accounts (Macfadyen 1850; Rock 1861) suggest that the tree was more plentiful in the past, but it is generally agreed that it was never common. One of the oldest and most impressive of the trees in Kingston grows at the Convent of Mercy Academy, also known as Alpha Girls School. Measured at 7.6 cm from the ground, it is 2.26 m in circumference. In 1986 Sister Mill Delores said the tree was already "as big as it is now" when she came to Jamaica from Malta in 1913 to teach at Alpha, and that at that time it was also called monkey tamarind tree. In 1970 Alex Hawkes visited this tree and 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 Soares, 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" seems to be of Caribbean origin. It has been reported in Jamaica, the Bahamas (Ives 1880:84), and Dominica (Gerth Van Wijk 1971:25). Monkey tamarind is not among the common names frequently mentioned in the literature, however. In fact most authors who have written about this species in Jamaica only cite the names baobab, Ethiopian sour gourd, or monkey bread (Edwards 1794:195; Lunan 1814:46; Macfadyen 1850:89; Morris 1884:19; Harris 1912:160; Adams 1972:479). Unlike the name monkey bread, monkey tamarind does not appear in any of the standard English dictionaries.

One of the earliest references to the name monkey tamarind is Baillon (1876–1892), cited by Gerth Van Wijk (1971:4). Another reference is Rock (1861:347), whose discussion of the baobab suggests this name came to his attention from a Caribbean source. The inference is based on the fact that he regarded the baobab as "indigenous to Africa and the West Indies," noting that although it was not common in Jamaica, "the pulp and rind or shell of the fruit are employed medicinally," and that "the nuts are occasionally exposed for sale in the markets at Kingston and elsewhere" (Rock 1861:349).

Another interesting reference to the name monkey tamarind that also associates it with Jamaica is Ives (1880). Ives 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 (Ives 1880:83–85) identify the tree as a baobab—probably introduced to the Bahamas from Jamaica as suggested by the name Jamaican tamarind.

THE MEANING OF MONKEY NAMES IN THE CARIBBEAN

In Jamaican culture, the true meaning of monkey in the many compound common names for plants and other things is clearly recognized by Cassidy (1971:382) in his discussion of *Morinda citrifolia* L. This is a small exotic tree from tropical Asia and the Pacific, now extensively naturalized in the wet, coastal areas of Jamaica, especially in the northeastern parishes of Portland and St. Mary (Morton 1992). In the Virgin Islands, *Morinda citrifolia* L. is called painkiller and monkey apple (Valls 1981:82). According to Cassidy (1971:382), it is known in Jamaica as bluuda, duck apple, hog berry, pig's apple, and monkey berry. In the eastern part of the parish of Portland where I did field research, the tree is commonly called hog apple although it is occasionally identified as jumbie chocho, and less frequently as duppy chocho. In explaining the name monkey berry, Cassidy (1971:382) points out that "monkey does not refer to actual animals eating the fruit . . . but suggests . . . that this is something like the proper plant but not really good—it imitates it in a ridiculous way as a monkey [does] a man (compare *monkey fiddle* and other monkey names)." I have followed Cassidy's interpretation and found that in Jamaica this principle seems to hold true for all plants with monkey names. In addition to monkey berry and monkey fiddle (*Pedilanthus tithymaloides* (L.) Poit.), this includes monkey breadfruit (*Artocarpus atilis* (S. Parkinson) Fosberg), monkey comb (*Pithecoctenium echinatum* Jacq.) and monkey apple (*Clusia flava* Jacq.).³

In Jamaica, the notion that the word monkey implies imitation holds true not only for plants, but for other things as well. For example, grated coconut boiled in sugar (to the point where it almost begins to burn) becomes hard when it cools, making it difficult to chew. This candy is called monkey iron—something imitating or resembling true iron. The same principle is implied when the word monkey is used to describe a person's behavior, appearance, or facial expressions. To say someone has a monkey face is to say that, like a monkey, he or she is ugly. To make monkey faces is to make ugly faces—faces like those of monkeys—that are meant to poke fun, ridicule, insult, or humor. Cassidy and LePage (1967:304) report that Monkey Jesus is a name used in Kingston to describe an ugly person. A clear example of the association of monkey with imitation—what Jamaicans call "follow fashion"—is evident in Jamaican proverbs that point to the potential for disaster in mimicking or "aping" others (Anderson and Cundall 1972:867):

Follow-fashion break monkey neck
Monkey follow-fashion cut him throat
Follow-fashion mek monkey lose him tail.

The use of monkey names to imply imitation or resemblance seems to hold true not only for Jamaica but for the Caribbean in general. According to Cassidy (1971:277), for example, the use of the expression "monkey face, for a grimace, has survived in Jamaica and Barbados though apparently obsolete elsewhere." It is possible that the survival of this expression is more widespread than Cassidy suggests, for it has also been reported for the Virgin Islands (Valls 1981:82).

There are monkey names for plants in other parts of the Caribbean where the meaning implied seems to be the same as in Jamaica. In the Virgin Islands, for

example, Valls (1981:82) says the vine *Mimosa unguis-cati* L. is called cat-law, cat's claw, cat's paw, and monkey earring. Monkey earring is obviously a reference to the rounded shape of the pea pod which bears a "ridiculous resemblance" to true earrings. In Barbados the small herbaceous plant *Ruellia tuberosa* L. is called monkey gun (Robertson and Gooding 1970:230). In Jamaica it is known as duppy pop gun.⁴ In both cases the plant receives its specific epithet from its explosive fruit—it imitates or resembles a real gun in the sound it produces. Similarly, mushrooms are called monkey umbrellas in Barbados and duppy umbrellas in Jamaica—they mimic real umbrellas (Robertson and Gooding 1970:230).

Another good example of monkey names for plants is the sandbox tree, *Hura crepitans* L., which grows up to 3.7 m in height with a relatively dense, spreading crown. This impressive tree of the Caribbean and other parts of tropical America is also known as Jumbie dinner bell and monkey dinner bell, and Valls (1981:82) reports the name monkey pistol for the Virgin Islands. Like the monkey gun (*Ruellia tuberosa* L.), the sandbox tree disperses its seeds by means of an explosive pod, hence the dinner bell names and the name monkey pistol. Rampini's (1873:157–158) incidental account of his experience with a sandbox tree while traveling in Jamaica suggests that the association between the exploding pod and a pistol shot was recognized in the nineteenth century:

As we [Rampini and his coachman] were driving along the sea-shore, just before entering the bustling little town of Black River, we met one of the old-fashioned "kittereens," a vehicle once universal in Jamaica, and still known, we believe, in some outlandish districts in Cornwall . . .

As we were wondering at this old-world turn-out, the nut of a sand-bag tree, expanded with the heat, burst with a loud explosion.

'Warra!' cried Bob, nearly jumping from his driving box, 'what for debbil shoot pistol to kill poor nigger so?'

Storer (1958:35) resorts to the common-sense approach of seeking a literal interpretation in his effort to explain the origin of the sandbox's other monkey name—monkey dinner bell tree. "Poultry," he writes, "(and where they occur, presumably monkeys) rush eagerly to find the seeds. On the continent, this action of the pod is the reason for the tree's name of Monkey Dinner Bell." A similar explanation is offered in the *Funk and Wagnalls New "Standard" Dictionary* (1958:1602): the tree is called monkey dinner bell because "the loud noise made by the bursting of the capsule when ripe is understood by the monkeys as a signal that a fresh supply of food is ready."

An early attempt at an explanation was presented by Reverend J. Scholes in 1885 (Abrahams and Szwed 1983:157): "Whether the noisy habit alluded to, arouses and calls the monkey to dinner, in the shape of the many button-like seeds scattered on the ground, or whether the noise is only a general summons to Master Monkey to attend to his corporal wants is a question for the learned to decide." Neither Scholes's or any of the other explanations offered above adequately explain the origin of monkey names in the Caribbean and elsewhere. It is equally possible—even much more likely—that the idea of a dinner bell refers to the noise made by the exploding fruit, and by the many seeds and other parts of the fruits that fall through the dense foliage of this very tall tree. In this context,

monkey as the generic term simply means imitative of, or bearing some resemblance to the real thing—a noisy dinner-bell.

THE BAOBAB AS A KIND OF TAMARIND

Thus, the name monkey tamarind tells us that the baobab is a kind of tamarind, but what is the tamarind and how is the baobab related to it? The real tamarind, *Tamarindus indica* L., is a large, evergreen, leguminous tree of Africa—some say India—that is now widespread throughout the tropics. Because it is usually a common tree in the human environment, the tamarind serves as a point of reference for identifying other plants that are also given the name tamarind. The majority of these are, like the tamarind, leguminous shrubs and trees that have leaves, flowers, or fruits that resemble the true tamarind. The baobab is one very noticeable exception since it bears no resemblance to the true tamarind in leaves, flowers, fruits, or physiognomy. What the baobab shares with the true tamarind is that its fruit is similar in taste.

The baobab has many uses and the fruit is one of the most valuable parts of the tree. The value of the fruit is evident when we consider that the most frequently cited English common names—baobab,⁵ Ethiopian sour gourd, sour gourd tree, cream of tartar tree, and monkey bread—are all in reference to the fruit. The names Ethiopian sour gourd, sour gourd tree, and cream of tartar tree indicate that one of the most important qualities of the fruit is its edible acidic pulp. Palmer and Pitman (1961:231) note that the pulp "[w]hen dry. . . becomes powdery, and mixed with water makes a refreshing drink. It is this powder which has given the names 'cream-of-tartar tree' and 'lemonade tree' to the baobab."

In Africa, India, and the Caribbean, not only do the tamarind and baobab grow sympatrically, they have also been reported as growing together (Fig. 6-7) with their branches intertwined (Lely 1925:9; Dalziel 1937:112; Owen 1970:24). Both trees produce indehiscent fruits that ripen in the winter and early spring. These fruits contain hard, dry seeds surrounded by an edible acidic pulp, and the pulp of the tamarind, like that of the baobab, is also used to make a refreshing drink.

The similar use of baobab and tamarind fruits is evident in many common names for the baobab that include the term tamarind. Varmah and Vaid (1978:461) report that in Allahabad, India, the baobab is known as *Vilaiti imli*—exotic tamarind. In some cases these generic terms seem to be related to a particular place. We have already seen references to the baobab as Jamaican Tamarind. Rock (1861:347) reports the name African tamarind, and in St. Croix, the baobab is known as Guinea tamarind.⁶ In India, one of the tree's many names is *khurasani imli*—*khurasani* tamarind. According to Burton-Page (1969:332), "The epithet *Khurasani* is fanciful, for the tree is unknown in Khurasan; it seems to be no more than an elegant word meaning 'foreign,' as in *American cloth*, *Russian salad*." Specific terms can also be related to individuals as in India where the baobab also is called *Gorak imli*—Gorak's tamarind—after Goraksanatha, whom Burton-Page (1969:332) described as "the patron saint of an order of yogis." The meaning of the name monkey tamarind is consistent with the above. The specific term *monkey* tells us that the baobab fruit imitates the taste of the real tamarind. *Monkey* serves

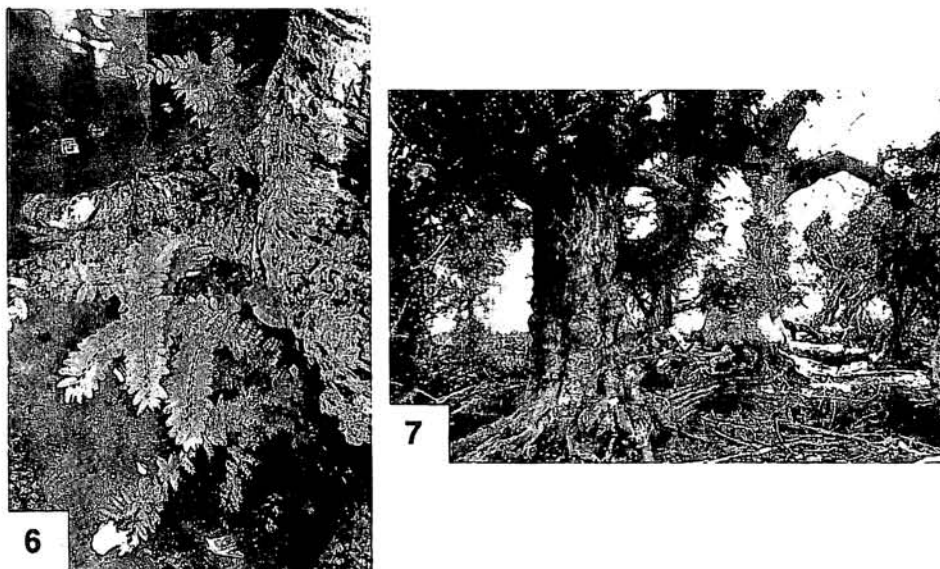


FIG. 6.—Tamarind seedlings at the root of the baobab at Alpha Girls School in Kingston; FIG. 7.—Tamarind and baobab growing side by side in St. Croix.

as only one of many specific terms that distinguishes various plants, particularly trees, as being kinds of tamarinds.

SUMMARY

Though it seems self-evident that the baobab's two monkey names refer to monkeys eating the fruit, I think that this is either not true, or if it is true, it is only partially so. The meaning of monkey tamarind in the Caribbean context suggests that monkey names imply imitation. In the case of the baobab, monkey tamarind refers not to monkeys eating the fruit, but to the simple fact that the fruit is similar in taste to tamarind.

It is not so easy to explain the name monkey bread, however. In what way can the baobab's fruit be said to imitate "real" bread? There are three possible answers. It could be argued that the white or creamy acidic pulp resembles bread. The name also could indicate that the baobab fruit has the same significance to monkeys as bread does to humans—it is their "staff of life." In the final analysis, it might well be that the name monkey bread does derive from primate consumption of the fruit, and that it is unrelated to the use of monkey as a generic term in the name monkey tamarind. I believe, however, that the use of *monkey* as a generic term in the name monkey bread is similar in construction and meaning to what has already been said about the name monkey tamarind. In fact, an examination of the meaning of monkey in the English language generally suggests that it is widely used in ways that are consistent with the argument made in this paper.

NOTES

¹In actuality, the two monkey names of the baobab—monkey bread and monkey tamarind—have been presented in a variety of ways: monkey bread, monkeybread, monkey-bread, monkey bread tree, monkey's bread, monkey's bread tree, monkeys-bread, monkeys bread tree, monkey bread nut, monkey bread fruit, monkey bread-fruit, monkey bread-fruit tree, monkey tamarind, and monkey tamarind tree.

²The dictionaries consulted are: The Oxford English Dictionary (1961, 1989), Clarendon Press, Oxford. Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language (1981), G. & C. Merriam Co., Springfield, MA. Funk and Wagnalls New "Standard" Dictionary of the English Language (1958), Funk and Wagnalls Company, New York. New Riverside University Dictionary (1984), The Riverside Publishing Company, Chicago, IL. The Universal Dictionary of the English Language (1961), Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1968), Random House, New York. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1971), American Heritage Publishing Co., New York.

³There is one clear case where the common name *monkey comb* does have a literal meaning. In his review of this manuscript, Bradley Bennett wrote: "In Ecuador, *Apeiba aspera* Aublet is called *peine de mono* (Monkey's comb). Woolly monkeys and capuchin monkeys use the spiny fruit capsule to brush their coat."

⁴*Duppy* is the Jamaican name for spirits, especially spirits of the dead. *Jumbie* has the same meaning and occurs in Jamaica and in other Caribbean Islands. In general, plants with duppy or jumbie names (of which there are many) are regarded as inedible or poisonous, while plants with monkey names are regarded as unusual in some way, but may still be eaten.

⁵Wickens (1982:174) says "In 1952, the Venetian herbalist and physician Prospero Alpino wrote that the fruit was known in those markets under the name *bu hobab*, which gave rise to the common European name *baobab* . . . Thus, it would appear that *bu hobab* was a local name invented by the Cairo merchants for a fruit (and tree) which they did not know in the wild."

⁶In St. Croix the baobab is also known as Guinea almond. This is probably because the baobab seeds which are eaten in St. Croix and Jamaica taste like the seeds of the tropical almond (*Terminalia catappa*).

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