THE PAST AND PRESENT USES OF BAMBOO IN JAMAICA

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Rashford, John H. (Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of Charleston, Charleston SC 29424). THE PAST AND PRESENT USES OF BAMBOO IN JAMAICA. Economic Botany 49(4): 395–405. 1995. Bamboos are useful to people wherever they grow, and in Jamaica, Bambusa vulgaris is no exception. Introduced in the 18th century, this bamboo is now well established, and has been put to a wide variety of uses from early on. This paper documents the past and present uses of bamboo in Jamaica.

Key Words: bamboo, Bambusa vulgaris Schrad., Jamaica ethnobotany.

Although it is widely known that bamboos are extremely useful to the people of Asia, their value to inhabitants of the neotropics is not as well recognized. This paper documents the past and present uses of bamboo in Jamaica. Since its introduction to the island, the “common” bamboo, Bambusa vulgaris Schrad.—the “most common bamboo in the world” (Farrelly 1984)—has become ubiquitous and is used in a great variety of ways. Some 10 to 16 m in height (Little and Wadsworth 1964), this giant evergreen tropical grass grows in “clumps” formed by many culms clustered together at the base, or in many clumps forming dense stands that in Jamaica are called “bamboo walks” (especially when framing roadsides).

BAMBOO IN JAMAICA

Bamboo occurs in Jamaica from sea level to ca 1000 m elevation (Adams 1972). In addition to being “commonly cultivated around dwellings” (Jamaica Agricultural Society 1954), it is also a giant naturalized weed restricted primarily to river courses, ponds, water holes, roadways, inaccessible hillsides, pastures, and areas in “ruinate,” i.e., agricultural land abandoned from cultivation (Eyre 1966; Johnston 1903; Lewis 1965; Symes 1971). Bamboo is now so wide-spread that it is not surprising that “there are many Jamaican places called by the rather logical name of Bamboo” (Hawkes 1976). One of the best-known is a small town in the parish of St. Ann between Brown’s Town and Claremont. Another is a “village” in the parish of St. Catherine which Alex Hawkes (1976) described as a place of “hospitable people” and “charming scenery.” The most famous of the bamboo places, though, is “Bamboo Walk” in the parish of St. Elizabeth—identified as “Bamboo Avenue” in some publications (Fodor 1971; Sibley 1978). It is a 4 km stretch of Jamaica’s main coastal road between Middle Quarters and Lacovia which is fringed by bamboo on both sides that meet to form an overarching canopy some 16 m above the road (Fig. 1). “Bamboo Walk” is one of the island’s scenic spots, frequented by tourists, and often pictured in books and on postcards.

It is generally believed bamboo was introduced into Jamaica from “Hispaniola” in the 18th century (Long 1972; Powell 1972), although opinions differ on whether it was the early (Storer 1958) or late 18th century (Anonymous 1910; Jamaica Agricultural Society 1954). Long (1972) said Wallen, who he described as an “ingenious gentleman” of the island, grew it on his estate called Chiswick in the parish of St. Thomas. Wallen and another Jamaican named Ellis, according to Long, were initially responsible for distributing the plant so that by 1774 bamboo was

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“flourishing in many different parts of [the] island.”

TRADITIONAL USES

From the time of its introduction, bamboo has remained a useful plant to Jamaicans, even though its uses have changed as the island has developed. These changes can be attributed in part to the availability of imported pharmaceuticals and synthetic materials; the switch to zinc, wire and plastic; the use of cement blocks and lumber for construction; the substitution of manufactured musical instruments, toys, utensils and tools; and, most of all to changing taste, since bamboo is traditionally used in many instances not because it is the best material, but because it is the cheapest and the most easily obtained.

Long’s report (1972:753) of bamboo in 18th century Jamaica was published not long after its introduction into the island. He offered a planter’s perspective that clearly recognized bamboo’s potential value for large estates:

It is certain, [bamboo] ... may be regarded as a valuable acquisition to this island; and if it reaches