The History of Breadfruit

I often visit my grandma in Jamaica. Sometimes around the back of the house, I'd find her roasting her favourite - breadfruit - over an open fire. About the size of a football with a puckered thick skin, she'd lay the fruit over burning wood, turning occasionally while flames lick the green-yellow skin until it was blackened. Then, she'd take the breadfruit off the charcoal and when it had cooled, bring it into the kitchen and begin to peel off the burnt skin with a knife, revealing the warm cream-coloured flesh. Next, Grandma would slice it up into large porous segments and fry it in a skillet until it turned a golden brown. She'd line a large floral-rimmed plastic plate with kitchen roll and place the slices down, letting the oils soak through the paper.

Sunk into the sofas in her living room, with the door open and morning's breeze greeting us, we'd have our trays balanced on our laps watching the news or an old Spaghetti Western on the TV. Some days the breadfruit would be served with fluffy ackee and ribbons of saltfish, other times a fried egg freshly laid from her hens or salty callaloo greens and mackerel cooked in a tangy tomato sauce. We'd crunch, nibble and chew in silent appreciation.

This starchy fruit is a staple in any Jamaican diet filling the same space as potatoes, yam or of course bread. Some prefer it boiled, but grandma insisted breadfruit tasted its best roasted. I'd never eat it back in London, although I'm sure it's easily sourced in the markets of Brixton or Peckham. What makes breadfruit so special to me, is how much it reminds me of my grandma. It was something we'd share together.

While breadfruit always reminds me of Jamaica, it hasn't always been on the island. I never really stopped to think about where this staple in Jamaican cuisine came from, or the fact that much like my ancestors, many of the plants and animals found on the island aren't native at all. The journey of breadfruit is one that links the histories of the Caribbean, Pacific Islands and Europe through colonisation.

The fruit had piqued the interest of Britain and botanist Joseph Banks some two hundred years ago, who managed to get himself a place on Captain Cook's voyage to Tahiti, arriving on the island in 1769. Banks decided the fast-growing plant and its fruits should be cultivated back in the Caribbean as a cheap and nutritious food source for enslaved Africans. One breadfruit tree can produce up to 200 fruits a season.

Banks was also probably best known for his involvement in the infamous mutiny against Captain William Bligh on the Bounty in 1789. Bligh, a lieutenant at the time, was appointed by Joseph Banks to bring breadfruit to the Caribbean. On the voyage returning to England from Tahiti with breadfruit in tow, he was cast onto a boat with loyal crew members and survived. Bligh eventually returned as a Captain and made it to Jamaica, arriving on the shores of Kingston, with the first breadfruit plants in 1793.

While there isn't much of a culinary presence of breadfruit in Britain, it's still stamped onto the country's landscape. I'd traversed past the Garden Museum in Lambeth, which celebrates the history of Britain's gardens a million times before. Although it's in the same borough I grew up in, my first visit was a recent one. And in all fairness, it doesn't look like a museum at first glance, because it's situated in the former church of St Mary's-at-Lambeth, with traditional stained glass windows and triangular roofs topped with crosses, customary of the gothic-style churches pervasive across the country.

I was there to see a small exhibition on Caribbean growers in Lambeth called *Sowing Roots: Caribbean Garden Heritage in South London*. I meandered around the small exhibition taking photos, scribbling notes and being pleasantly surprised by familiar faces and names who had contributed to the exhibition and offered botanical knowledge rooted in Caribbean culture.

Nestled outside of the museum in the garden was a weathered tombstone. William Bligh's tombstone, to be exact, carrying the engraving: 'the celebrated navigator who first transplanted the breadfruit tree from Otaheite to the West Indies.'

It wasn't lost on me the weighted feeling I was holding as I stood in the rain in front of William Bligh's tombstone moments after visiting an exhibition on the legacy of Caribbean growers in Britain. These people, like myself, were direct descendants of those same enslaved Africans who the breadfruit was first intended for in the Caribbean, the breadfruit I enjoyed so much with my grandma - all these histories meeting practically on my doorstep. I thought about our traditional growing knowledge, passed down for generations and brought with us to Britain, and how it is so crucial that it's deserving of its own exhibition, albeit a small one.

The introduction of breadfruit to Jamaica has had a lasting impact on Jamaica's culture and cuisine, becoming a provision and serving as a reminder of the links between Jamaica and Britain that were forged during the colonial period and beyond. Provisions, also known as 'hard food' in Jamaica, are the food sources enslaved people ate on Caribbean islands, with ground vegetables being eaten by Indigenous communities on the island prior. Often root vegetables like yams, potatoes, pumpkins and cassava, but also green bananas, cho cho and of course breadfruit, make up a significant portion of the Jamaican diet.

These ground provisions played a crucial role in the survival of enslaved Africans, providing a substantial source of nutrition. By cultivating and eating these foods, enslaved Africans could maintain their physical health and resist the toll of their forced labour. Today, it still quietly serves as a symbol of the legacy of resilience and resistance to colonialism. Even after emancipation, what began as a necessity for survival, soon became a cultural norm up until this very day, when my grandma and I shared slices for breakfast.