



The Legendary Baobab

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This sculpture of the ponderous, bottle-shaped baobab tree was created by a Kenyan artist. One of the plant kingdom's strangest members, the baobab, is native to the savannas of Africa, Australia, and the island of Madagascar, but is widely cultivated everywhere in the tropics today as a street and park tree because of its several peculiarities. Trees can attain incredible age, living for thousands of years. The naturalist Alexander von Humboldt called the baobab "the oldest organic monument of our planet." One estimate of a baobab to be 5,125 years old is debatable as there are no annual rings produced in the wood to count.

Proportions

The girth of most baobabs is way out of proportion to their height, invoking the image of a stubby, fat tree (see *Purdue University, CES-FNR-250 for information about fats and other lipids in trees*). Trunk diameters of 30 feet or more, snugly clad with smooth bark are common, but tree heights are usually only 40 feet, sometimes, but rarely, extending to 70 feet. The enlarged trunk is used to store water, not fat, for the tree's use during long dry seasons.

Although the trunk is quite thick, a bullet fired from a rifle at high velocity will pass right through it because its tissues are soft and pulpy. Since the wood is soft, it is subject to attack by fungi that can easily render the tree hollow. Such trees are often used as human dwellings. The missionary explorer David Livingstone spoke of a hollow trunk of a baobab in which 20 to 30 men could lie down with ease. One hollowed-out tree was even used for at time as a town jail in Queensland, Australia.

Uses

All parts of the tree are exceedingly useful. The inner bark furnishes a fiber that is made into ropes, twisted into strings for musical instruments, and woven into cloth. The fiber is so strong as to give rise to a common Swahili saying, "as secure as an elephant bound with a baobab rope." The leaves, rich in vitamin C, are cooked and eaten as a vegetable, and condiments are derived from the bark. Baobab roots can be cooked and eaten or made into a red dye.

Trees produce large white flowers up to five inches across that hang down on long stalks. The waxy, crinkled petals surround dense clusters of purple stamens that look like powder puffs. This flashy floral display is utterly self-indulgent since the flowers open only in the dark of night and must emit a stinky aroma to attract pollinating bats feeding on the nectar. Humans on occasion consume the starchy pulp of the fruits, which taste like gingerbread, but they must compete with baboons and other creatures for it. The pendant fruits are hair-covered, gray, and gourd-like, about a foot long, and resemble dead rats hanging from the tree by their tails; hence the facetious moniker, “Dead Rat Tree.” Elephants seem to relish all parts of the tree, sometimes completely consuming them.

The peculiar appearance of the tree apparently does not discourage weaver birds that adorn the tips of the highest branches with their woven basket-like nests far away from predators. The baobab is also home to many insects and other birds such as parrots, hornbills, and kingfishers that roost or nest in holes in the trunk, while lovebirds, owls, and eagles perch in the short, stocky branches that are leafless and bare for much of the year during the dry season.

Folklore

Legend has it that this grotesque wonder was created when the tree persisted in complaining that it did not have attractive attributes like other trees. Losing patience, the devil yanked up the tree and shoved its branches back into the earth with the roots protruding into the air.

Occurrence

There are nine species of baobab (*Adansonia*): one grows in Australia, one in Africa, and seven are restricted to the island of Madagascar noted for its biological diversity and bizarre flora and fauna. There

are a few fine old specimens of baobab in estates and parks in southern Florida and the Caribbean where they are strikingly beautiful as dominant, attention grabbers. They are not for the small garden. This unique tree probably was made even more recognizable to Americans because it is the centerpiece in Disney’s Animal Kingdom and was featured as the Tree of Life in Disney’s *Lion King*.



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