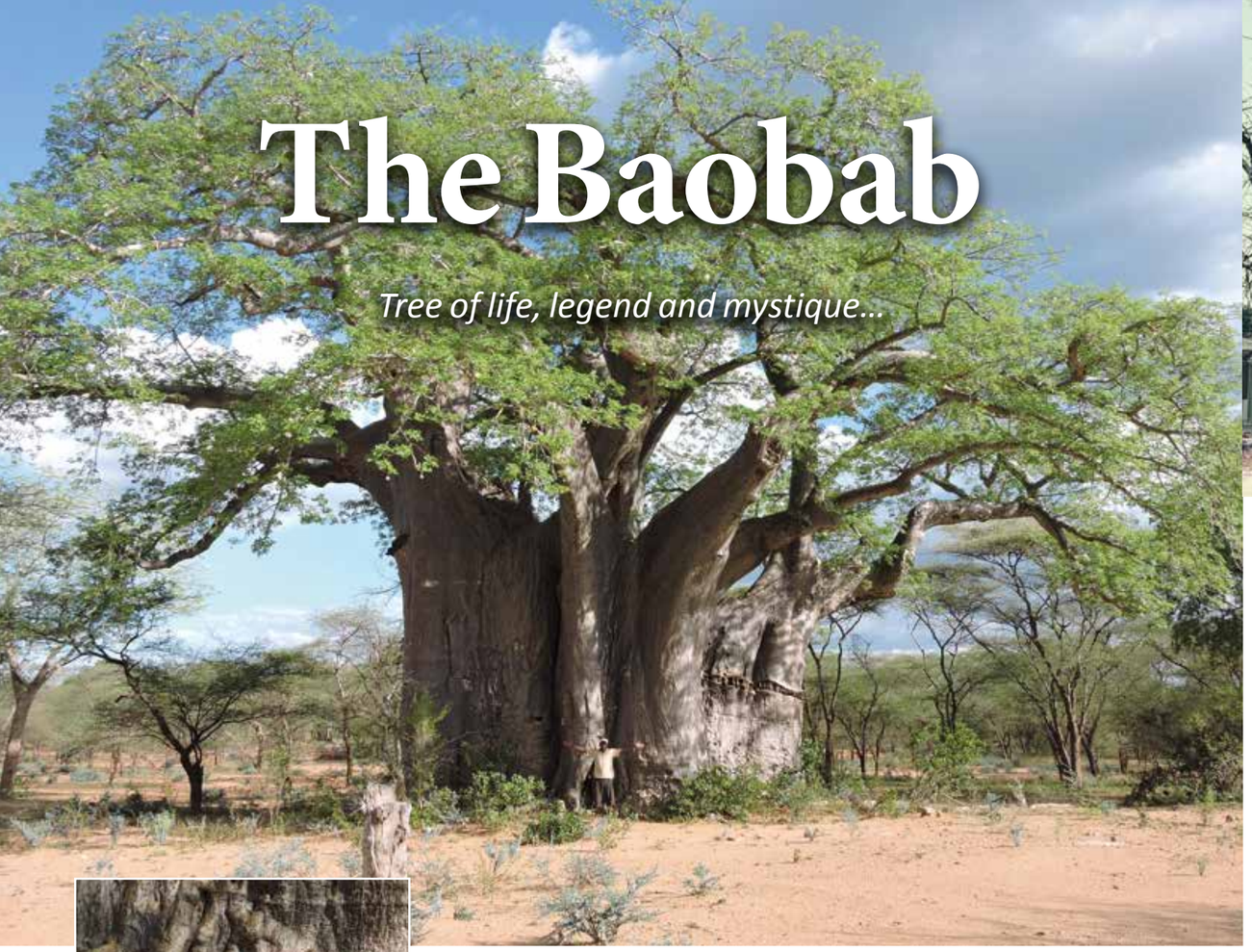
The Baobab

Tree of life, legend and mystique...



MAIN ABOVE: This photo of the baobab on Mokore Ranch, Zimbabwe, was taken in November when in leaf. Its trunk is 40 metres in circumference, yet completely hollow down to the ground inside.
ABOVE: The small holes in the Mokore baobab's ancient trunk were made many centuries ago by Khoi San who hammered wooden stakes into it to form a ladder. Notice the immensely thick, sap-filled fibrous bark.

ABOVE: Probably the world's only public toilet inside a baobab (Katima Mulilo, Caprivi, 1976) – a flush toilet with piped water. Notice the bomb shelter (I took the photo during SA's border war with Angola). ABOVE RIGHT: Notice how the red-billed buffalo-weavers' nests are all built on one side of the baobab only. In winter, baobabs are leafless.

by **GREGOR WOODS**

THOUGH IT RANKS among the rarest trees in the world, the baobab is one of the most famous, and has become a symbol of Africa. They stand out like castles among the other bushveld trees. Viewed close up, the baobab's weird form, strange bark and immense girth leave most people gawping as though viewing some sort of giant deformity. Yet when you learn of the wonders of this tree, you come to love it like no other. To stand before one of these giants knowing that you are looking at a living thing that has been growing there since the time of Christ, is truly awe-inspiring.

The famous Prussian botanical geographer, Alexander Humboldt (1769 – 1859) described the baobab as "the oldest organic monument of our planet". Baobabs grow to an astonishing age, though not everyone agrees on just how old a particular tree might be. My tree book states that carbon-dating (a reliable modern scientific method) proves the bigger baobabs to be around 2 000 years old. The biggest known baobab, called the Sunland, in Modjadjiskloof (formerly Duiwelskloof), Limpopo, which had a circumference of 47 metres, is said to have been carbon-dated as 6 000 years old. The trunk was hollow, and the landowners built a pub inside it, into which 40 people once crammed for a party. Sadly, a huge branch broke off a few years ago, and then, in 2017, the tree collapsed. Fortunately, many photos of it exist. I have read of other baobabs having been carbon-dated at 3 000 years old.

THE BIG TREE illustrated here, which is growing on the bank of the Turgwe River in Zimbabwe, on Mokore Ranch owned by the well-known PH Barrie Duckworth, was estimated by a tree expert to be 1 200 to 1 500 years old. With its circumference of 40 metres, I would have thought it much older. I have seen a good many baobabs, but none as big as this, and only one other that came close. Barrie tells me the trunk is completely hollow all the way down to the ground. There is a 'window' half way up, through which a slim person can crawl; this opens into a large room in which you could park a vehicle. There are smaller holes at ground-level, but none big enough for a person to gain entry. Jaimie-Lee Holtzhausen of Mokore Ranch (who very kindly took these photos at my request) tells me the small holes you see in the bark were made by Khoi San who lived there 'in the olden days'. They hammered wooden stakes into the tree to serve as a ladder to climb it for its leaves and fruit; also to get rainwater that had collected in its hollows, and to store food and take refuge.

The historical migrations of the Bantu-speaking peoples emanating from West Africa, via East Africa, then southwards, crossed the Zambezi River with their cattle and goats around the year 250 AD. The resident Khoi San, hunter-gatherers who were not tribally organized but operated in independent family units, naturally regarded the newcomers' livestock as game to be hunted. Inevitably, the numerically superior tribes, who included the ancestors of the maShona, displaced the Khoi San from Zimbabwe, who moved into the Kalahari of Botswana and Namibia. I am no tree expert, but I can't help thinking that the Mokore baobab must have already been pretty big by that time for the earlier Khoi San to have been hammering stakes into it in order to climb it. Botanists note that baobabs described by early explorers like David Livingstone in the 1850s have changed little these past 150 years. Some baobabs still bear carved initials and dates from that era.

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Africa's baobab is the *Adansonia digitata* (subspecies also grow in Madagascar). A related species, *A. gregorii*, grows in Australia, attributed to the fact that Africa, Madagascar, Australia, Antarctica and South America were once all joined as a single Mesozoic landmass known as Gondwanaland. Many sources glibly state that baobabs also grow in India and Ceylon, which somehow didn't sound right, and it took me quite some research to determine that those were 'naturalized' (introduced). The name *Adansonia* is that of Michel Adanson, the French botanist who first recorded this species in Senegal around 1750, while *digitata* refers to its leaves which resemble the spread fingers of a hand.

The common name baobab is from the Arabic *buhibab* meaning 'father of many seeds'. I have been unable, in the time available to me, to determine the San name for this tree, though doubtless there will have been many over the millennia, and the current Khoi San of Botswana and Namibia will still be using at least one of them. Most local African tribal names for this tree stem from the same root-word: Swahili *mbuyu*; Shona *mbuyu*; Venda *movhuyu*; Tsonga *Ximuwu*, Zulu *isiMuhu*.

LEFT TOP: Notice the long root that snakes out from the baobab toward the viewer. Such roots are soft and filled with water – a life-saver for elephants during droughts.
MIDDLE: The large, velvet-coated seed-pods.
BOTTOM: Young baobabs look nothing like the mature trees.

Many San and Bantu religious beliefs, folktales, superstitions and legends surround the baobab. One belief seems common to both San and Bantu – that of the 'upside-down tree'. The story varies, some believing that God, in a moment of anger, ripped the baobab out by its roots, inverted it, and shoved it back into the ground, burying its branches while leaving its roots uppermost. The San believe that no baobabs have ever grown from seeds, which is why no saplings exist: God tosses adult baobabs out of paradise/heaven and they fall to earth upside down, their branches becoming buried, roots aloft. This belief is due to the baobab's short, tapering branches (relative to its girth) – after shedding their leaves each winter, the naked branches look more like roots. The belief that no small baobabs exist may stem from the fact that young baobabs look nothing like the mature trees, and can easily be mistaken for common savannah-bushveld trees.

The late Brian Marsh, lifelong professional hunter, author and *Magnum* Contributor, told me that he employed a *Basarwa* tracker in Botswana (Basarwa is the seTswana name for the Khoi San) who taught him many Khoi San beliefs regarding the baobab. They believe that the baobab has a soul. This is why, unlike other trees which, after dying, remain solid and standing for many years, the baobab simply disappears – just as it appeared out of heaven fully grown. This is so that its soul is quickly released. God made a covenant with the baobab – he granted its soul quick release for return to paradise, in exchange for which the baobab must provide the San (humans) with food, water and shelter.

This sudden disappearance of a dead baobab is a pretty accurate description. Its wood is extremely soft, fibrous and moisture-filled, as is its bark – rather like that of a pawpaw tree. On dying, it rapidly dries out and the trunk simply implodes and disintegrates into a heap of fine fibre which soon disappears. I have seen the remains of a big baobab that died in Limpopo – it was just a broad, shallow carpet of white fibre. This happens very rapidly – which I find mystifying for a tree which has been standing for 2 000 years!

THE BAOBAB HAS certainly kept the covenant. It provides man with all manner of sustenance, nutrition and medicines. Space limitations do not permit a full list here (science lists some 300 benefits) but let's start with food and drink. Its spongy, fibrous bark is so moisture-filled that chewing it slakes thirst and replenishes salt lost from perspiring – it has saved many a life. Its leaves, boiled and eaten as spinach, are rich in iron. The large, velvet-coated seed-pods, initially fig-shaped, elongate to a rugby-ball shape some 30cm long with a thick casing, and each hangs from a long stem. Inside the pod are numerous large, tough, kidney-shaped seeds, all packed in a powdery pulp which contains tartaric acid (cream of tartar). This pulp contains six times more vitamin-C than oranges, as well as magnesium, potassium and complex B-vitamins; it can be mixed with water to make a tasty, refreshing and nutritious drink. The seeds can be sucked to relieve thirst, or boiled then broken open, and the kernels eaten. They can also be dried, roasted and ground into powder to make a nutritious hot drink that tastes like coffee.

The San removed the seeds and pulp through an orifice bored out at the stem-junction of the pod's thick outer casing which otherwise remained intact. Dried out like a gourd, the outer casing is very hard and tough, and they used it to carry water, as they did ostrich eggs. Baobab bark fibre also makes excellent ropes and twine, which

Notice how the many baobabs tower like castles above the other bushveld trees. I took this photo near Musina, Limpopo.

can be woven into mats, baskets, water-proof hats and even fabric.

The baobab also provides medicinal benefits. Tribes along the Limpopo believe that women living in kraals where baobabs are plentiful have more children – perceived as a great blessing. They eat soup made from boiled baobab leaves, rich in vitamins; medical science has proved that this compensates for deficiencies in their diet, confirming that it heightens their fertility rate. The leaves are also eaten to treat kidney and bladder disorders, and asthma, and their juice relieves insect bites.

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Moreover, this great tree serves the animal kingdom – in fact it creates its own eco-system, supporting innumerable species from the largest to the tiniest. Elephants eat its bark for moisture and nutrition, stripping it off with their tusks (baobab bark regrows; in fact its bark is its strength). Baboons and warthogs eat its fruit. Bush-babies, galagos (*nagapies*) and fruit-bats drink the nectar from its flowers. These lovely big white blooms hang upside-down, opening at night, which has Zimbabwean tribes believing the flowers host evil spirits. Being nocturnal, baobab flowers are pollenated by fruit bats, not bees.

Hornbills nest in holes in the baobab's trunk and branches. Red-billed buffalo weavers favour the baobab for building their big, untidy communal nests of sticks and twigs. Folklore has it that these birds always build on the west side of the baobab (which can serve as a compass for the lost hunter). This appears to be factual, though I know of no proven explanation for it.

Many baobabs have enormously long, exposed roots extending several metres from the trunk – I have seen several such examples in the Messina/Musina area. These roots are heavily saturated with water, and elephants tear them up and chew the bark in times of drought. My wife has a bonsaied baobab with roots bigger than the tree itself; she periodically cuts them off and replants the tree.

A surprising number of baobabs have hollow trunks. In the late 1960s, en route to Rhodesia, I took a photo of my three small daughters sitting side-by-side in a hollow baobab. In the mid-1970s, during SA's Border War, I took the photo shown here of a baobab in the Caprivi Strip which had a working flush toilet inside it, complete with piped water. Some very big baobabs seem to grow as a cluster of two or more pillars which some say are buttresses. I have long wondered if it isn't a case of two or more seeds having germinated close together, and as they grow, their trunks merge to form one very large tree. It would also explain why many large baobabs have two or even three large hollows, sometimes connected, within their trunks.

It seems that all big baobabs have heavily scarred trunks, the result of stripping by elephants as well as by San and other peoples long ago. I always marvel how the regrown bark appears to flow downward in waves like molten wax on a candle. These scars remain for hundreds, even thousands of years. The baobab is indeed the oldest living monument of our planet.