

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IMW-10
Baobabs

P.O. Box 5113
Nairobi, Kenya
October 31, 1961

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

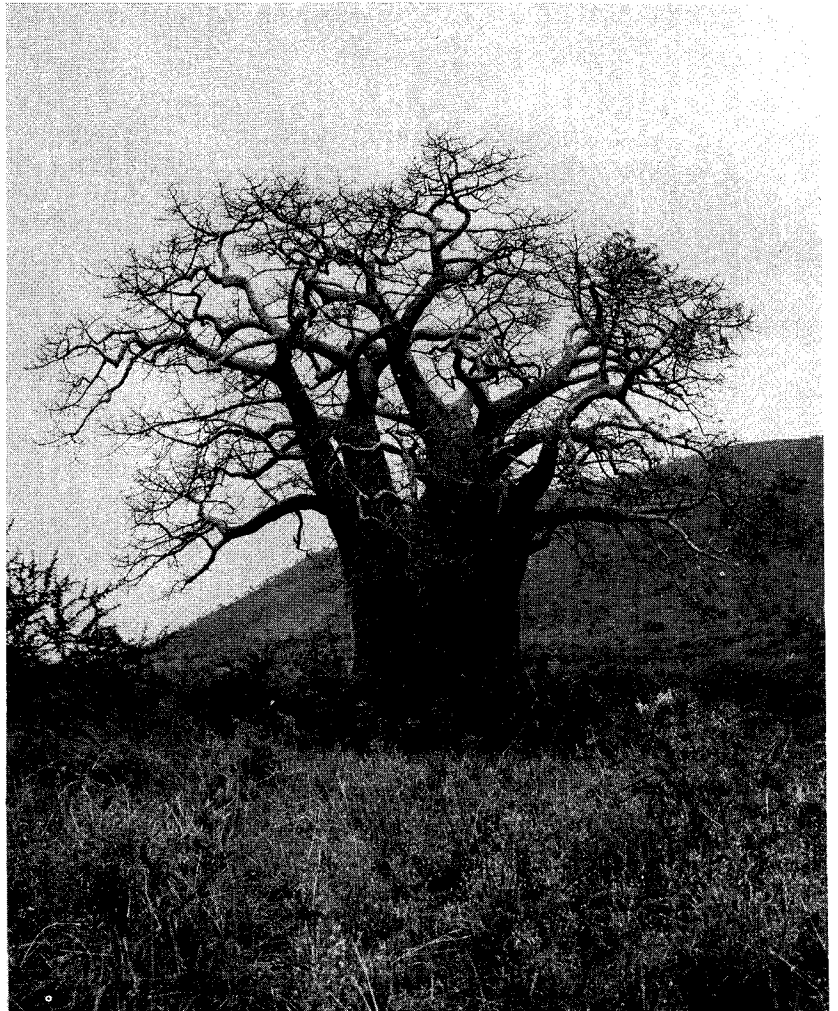
As one gets to know an area well, there are certain things which, although often not limited to that area, one associates entirely with it. I feel this way about baobabs and East Africa. While I was travelling through southern Africa last year, I wrote in my diary of my first encounter with them: "The road south from Bulawayo to Beit Bridge (the border of Southern Rhodesia and the Union of South Africa) passes through the high veld which is distinguished by its numerous baobabs. These fantastic thick-trunked trees

(the monkey-bread tree) cover an area from the road to the horizon and appear as ghostly sentinels."

This may sound a bit dramatic, but baobabs are dramatic. Much of East Africa is covered with them, and the more I see, the more they come to represent East Africa to me (along with a few other things).

Baobabs have caught the imagination of many. I immediately think of Antoine de Saint-Exupery's charming tale, The Little Prince, in which the Little Prince warns of the danger of allowing baobabs to grow unchecked. They are weird trees and the enclosed photographs give one reason why. All were taken on the same day within a few miles of each other, and of the four trees two are in bloom and two aren't. The largest one is half in bloom, although its other side is bare. Their cycle appears to have

Half in bloom,...

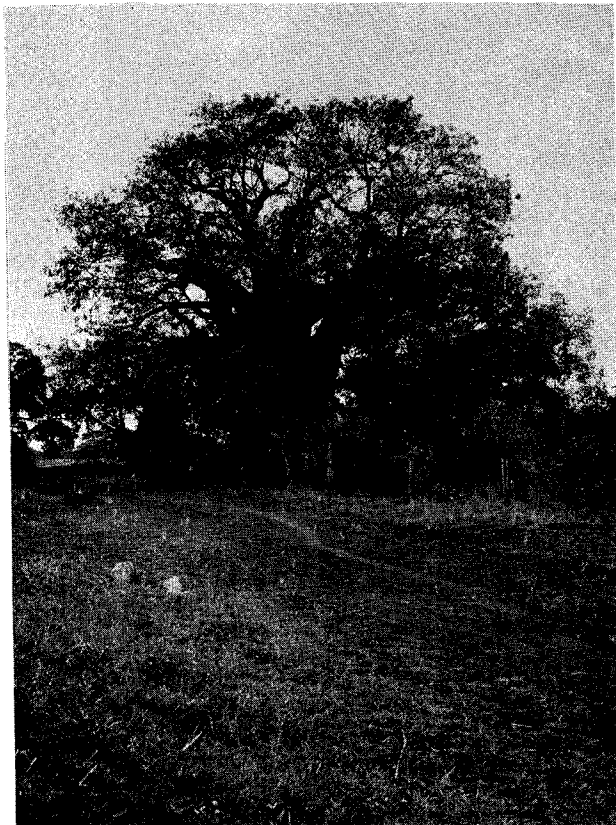


neither rhyme nor reason.

The Oxford Dictionary says baobabs were "first mentioned in 1592", but they were an important aspect of the rural economy in many parts of Africa long before that. Botanists call the baobab *Adansonia digitata* and it belongs to the family Bombacaceae. It also has numerous local names such as the Ethiopian sour gourd tree, cream of tartar tree (its fruit has a well-defined acid taste), tebelidi (Arabic) and mbuyu (Swahili). It is one of the largest trees known and its stem is as much as thirty feet across, but its height is not great. Its short squat attitude is evident even in the youngest trees. Baobabs yield fruit after eight to ten years although far more abundantly after thirty. It is a large woody fruit, containing a pleasant cool-tasting mucilaginous pulp in which the seeds are buried. Some botanists distinguish between a long and a short-fruited variety.

The baobab has an irregular distribution. A native of tropical Africa, it is found as far north as the Kordofan and Fung regions of the Sudan and as far south as the Union of South Africa and Madagascar. It has an uneven distribution on the West Coast, and in East Africa it is found in Kenya and Tanganyika, but there is only one known specimen in Uganda. That lone tree grows in the Botanical Gardens in Entebbe. Baobabs are restricted almost entirely to the savannah from sea level to 4,000 feet.

...in full bloom, and...



Virtually everything in the baobab is used somewhere for something. It is used most commonly for food, medicine, clothing, paper and fertilizer. Strangely enough its wood is the only part which is not commonly used, because it is light and bulky and quickly rots. The Hausa have an epithet for it, fanko, which means good-for-nothing.

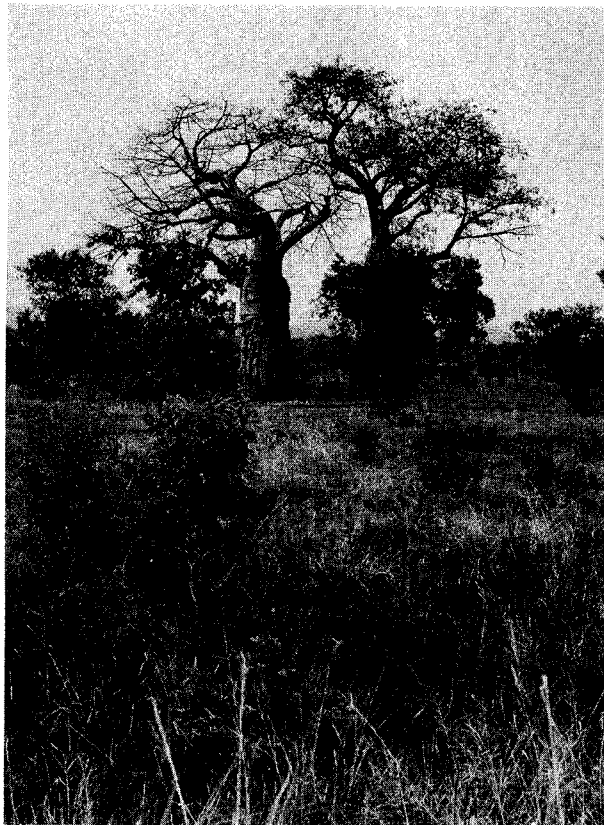
Much of the tree is eaten in some form or other. Usually it is as a food seasoner or appetizer, but in times of scarcity it becomes a staple. The fruit has a dry acid pulp of a pinkish tinge with black seeds. Both are edible. They can be eaten right off the tree, or more often a piece of the shell is broken off, water poured onto the dry pulp and stirred. The resulting mixture is boiled and later drunk as a cool refreshment. The acid pulp is also used to curdle milk. The vitamin-rich leaves are good either fresh as a substitute for spinach, or in dried

and powdered forms, the former to make vegetable soup and the latter as a seasoning for other foods. The seeds also taste good and are eaten as ordinary nuts. The tender roots of young baobabs are eaten, as are the white shoots from germinating seeds which are a good substitute for asparagus. Even horses benefit from baobabs. The leaves are a usual ingredient of horse fodder in Nigeria and they keep horses in good condition with sufficient energy for long trips.

The roots, leaves, pulp and bark of the baobab are thought to have medicinal properties and are extensively used. Specific mixtures are prescribed for almost all symptoms. A concoction made from the leaves prevents kidney and bladder trouble and cures dysentery, fever, toothache and respiratory ailments. Even smallpox is treated with it. Some mixtures are taken internally and others are applied locally to reduce swelling and cure eye trouble, among other things. The leaves are also an effective antidote for a certain poison used on arrows. The bark is sometimes used as a substitute for quinine. The gummy fluid from the bark and a powder scraped from the outside of the fruit are applied to sores in order to cleanse them and stimulate granulation. Children are bathed in a concoction made from the bark. The medicinal qualities of baobabs were once so famous that Sudan exported the components to Europe.

Baobabs also have numerous domestic uses. The bark is used for tanning in the Cameroons; a red dye is extracted from the roots; its seeds, finely ground, are good as fertilizer and fuel, and the resulting ash is used to manufacture a native soap as well as to plaster the walls of huts; and pulverized shells are added to snuff. The pulp burns with an irritating smoke which acts as a fumigant to keep biting insects away from animals.

Its greatest value is in the manufacture of cloth and rope. The inner bark yields a particularly strong and durable fiber used in ropes as well as strings for musical instruments. The fiber can either be woven into cloth or the bark can be pounded into a bark-cloth to be worn as aprons or used for



...one of each.

sacking. Even waterproof hats and drinking cups can be made from it. At one time its bark-cloth was exported to England for the manufacture of strong packing paper. Baobabs are constantly denuded of their bark in some areas, but they seem to have the power of regeneration much like the cork tree.

The trunks of living trees are often excavated to form houses. In Sudan they are used for storing water in the dry season, for there is practically no evaporation and the water remains sweet and clear for months. The hollowed out tree is also a good drying chamber in which suspended bodies can be conveniently mummified.

The baobab certainly has a variety of uses. It also has a small group of devoted admirers. Baobab lovers are a breed unto themselves. A certain Major Trollope of Katima Mutilo in Northern Rhodesia has completely outfitted a lavatory within a baobab. At Feira, also in Northern Rhodesia (reportedly one of the hottest and stickiest areas in the territory), two baobabs stand next to each other overlooking the confluence of the Zambezi and Luangwa Rivers. One is for gentlemen and the other for ladies, and upon closing their doors they are indistinguishable from ordinary baobabs. The view in the evening of vast flocks of ducks coming home to roost near the rivers is said to be incomparable.

So are the baobabs!

Sincerely yours,



Ian Michael Wright

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