

*Adansonia digitata*

[Synonyms : *Adansonia bahobab*, *Adansonia integrifolia*, *Adansonia scutula*, *Adansonia situla*, *Adansonia sphaerocarpa*, *Adansonia sulcata*, *Baobabus digitata*, *Ophelus sitularius*]

**BAOBAB** (Creole, Danish, English, Estonian, German, Spanish, Swedish, Thai) is a semi-evergreen tree. Native to tropical Africa it has fragrant yellow-white flowers with purplish stamens.

It is also known as *Abebrødstræ* (Danish), *Adansonie d' Afrique* (French), *Adansonie digitée* (French), *Affenbrodbaum* (German), African calabash tree, African baobab, *Afrikaanse kremetart* (Afrikaans), *Afrikanischer Baobab* (German), *Albero bottiglia* (Italian), *Albero di mille anni* (Italian), *Apebroodboom* (Dutch – South Africa), *Apelbroodboom* (Afrikaans), *Apenbroodboom* (Dutch), *Baaobaab* (Hindi), *Baobaba* (Malagasy), *Baobab africain* (French), *Baobab africano* (Italian), *Baobab afrykański* (Polish), *Baobab ağaci* (Turkish), *Baobab del África* (Spanish), *Baobab de Mahajanga* (French, Madagascan), *Baobab de Mozambique* (French), *Baobab dlanitý* (Slovak), *Baobab prstnatý* (Czech), *Baobabu* (Japanese), *Baobab własciwy* (Polish), *Bao báp châu Phi* (Vietnamese), *Baovola* (Malagasy), *Bawbab* (Arabic), Bottle tree, *Boringy* (Malagasy), *Boy* (Malagasy), *Bozobe* (Malagasy), *Calebassier du Sénégal* (French), *Choyarichich* (Indian), Cream of tartar tree, Dead rat tree, *Dton baobab* (Thai), Ethiopian sour bread, Ethiopian sour gourd, *Gorakhaamli* (Indian), *Gorak chinch* (Gujarati), *Gorakhimli* (Hindi), *Gorakshi* (Sanskrit), *Goram lichora* (Hindi), *Gros mapou* (French), *Harilik ahvileivapuu* (Estonian), *Hou mian bao shu* (Chinese), Judas's bag, *Kremetart* (Afrikaans), *Kremetartboom* (Afrikaans, Dutch), Lemonade tree, *Maymun ekmeği ağaci* (Turkish), *Mboio* (Malagasy), *Mboy* (Malagasy), Monkey bread, Monkey bread tree, *Noce d' Egitto* (Italian), *Pain de singe* (French), *Paparapulua* (Tamil), *Perauka* (Tamil), *Perruka* (Tamil), *Purunku* (Tamil), *Rainiala* (Malagasy), *Reniala* (Malagasy), *Ringy* (Malagasy), *Sefo* (Malagasy), *Shagar el bawbab* (Arabic), *Shagar khubzel qurud* (Arabic), *Simachinta* (Telugu), Sour gourd, Sour gourd tree, *Tebeldi* (Arabic), *umShimulu* (Zulu), *Vanoa* (Malagasy), and *Vontana* (Malagasy).

The flowers are pollinated by bats and bush-babies.

Baobab is a protected species in some countries eg. South Africa (since 1941).

*Digitata* is derived from Latin *digiti* (finger) meaning 'lobed like an open hand or finger-like'.

These weirdly-shaped trees, with their squat trunks, can live up to 2,000 years and are believed by many to be one of the longest lived trees in the world. (Actually there is much debate among botanists about the calculation of the age of them –and thus the claims for their great age – because the trunk does not produce annual rings.) It was once said that the very old trees could ignite spontaneously, but if their wood has dried out they actually collapse into a pile. Despite this the tenacity of the tree is incredible – bark will re-grow to replace any which is stripped off by wild animals, the tree will survive even after a veldt fire has destroyed its inside, and its roots can reach out as much as 100 yards to gather water (baobab often grow in arid areas). Possibly the most fascinating fact however is that they can decrease and increase in size. Authorities believe that this may be caused by droughts and subsequent wet years.

In parts of central Africa the baobab is still believed to be possessed by a soul or by ancestral

spirits. Its strange shape is accounted for in local African tales. One relates how the Creator originally planted the tree in rain-forests but it complained that the climate made its trunk swell so it was moved to much higher slopes. Here the tree ignored the spectacular views and expressed its displeasure at the degree of humidity. Disappointed by these persistent grievances the Creator lifted the tree up and deposited it in arid highland – unwittingly, upside down.

The tree is depicted in the coat of arms for Senegal.

The wood of the huge bottle-shaped trunk of the living tree, because it is so soft and spongy, can be tunnelled into easily. (Some trees are already hollow because of a fungus which attacks the trunks.) The hollowed trunk has been used not only as a silo for corn, as a shelter, or as a prison-cell (and even a lavatory) but also in the past as the final resting place for African chieftains (the bodies were suspended and they became mummified without any embalmment as the ‘tomb’ was completely dry and preserved them) and even a water reservoir which is capable of holding as much as 120,000 litres. The trunks have also been fashioned into dug-out canoes and rafts.

During drought baobabs are attacked by elephants who are aware of the moisture they contain. They will tear through the bark with their tusks to get at the juicy tissues if easier sources of water are unavailable. Sometimes they can completely consume the tree – leaves and twigs as well.

One tree that happens to have avoided this fate has become a national monument. The Scottish missionary and traveller, David Livingstone (1813-1873) mentioned it in his diary and authorities note that he described the baobab as a  
carrot planted upside down.

When this tree was found in the 1970s his initials, carved into the inner wall, were found undamaged. Fortunately it happens to grow within comfortable range of a stable river system and elephants have not needed to resort to its destruction during dry periods in order to quench their thirst.

The bark fibre used to be woven into cloth, particularly by the natives of the Transvaal, and strips of it can still be used for ropes and mats. In the Cameroons the bark is used for tanning. In India bark fibre is not only used for cordage but also for making the paper for bank notes. In many areas the strong fibre from the inner bark is made into fishing nets, and it has also provided strings for musical instruments.

The pollen is said to make a good glue, and young green leaflets have been cooked in soup and used as a flavouring.

The gourd-like, velvety-coated, yellowish-brown fruit, which are eaten by baboons, provide a source of food and seasoning for local people. The sticky, white pulp can be made into what is said to be a pleasant, thirst-quenching drink which is rich in Vitamin C and contains citric and tartaric acids. In East Africa the nomadic tribes have also used this pulp to curdle milk, and it has provided a rubber coagulant too. Locally the fruit pulp has also been burnt to fumigate insects on domestic animals.

The pounded black seeds have provided a famine food, and have been mixed with millet to make a thin gruel. They yield an edible golden yellow oil, with a pleasant taste, which has been used as a source of fuel. – and has also been employed in the manufacture of soap. Strung together the round seeds have been used by local potters to smooth their pieces before firing them.

Medicinally, the pulp has been used locally as an alternative to quinine (*Cinchona officinalis*) in the treatment of fevers, and as a remedy for dysentery, and scurvy. It is also used to soothe skin irritation.