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*Pentaclethra macrophylla*

**OILBEAN TREE** is an evergreen tree. Native to tropical Africa it has sweetly fragrant, yellowish flowers.

It is also known as *Ataa* (Ashanti, Fanti and Twi), *Atawa* (Ashanti, Fanti and Twi), *Atewa* (Ghanaian), *Atta bean*, *Bobala* (Twi), *Congo acacia*, *Ekuma* (Fanti), *Essiri* (Ghanaian), *Kandika N'kandika* (Congolese), *Kiansonso* (Zairean), *Kiasosa* (Zairean), *Mubala* (Ghanaian), *Ossei* (Gabonese), *Ovala* (Ghanaian), and *Owala oil*.

The root has been shown to contain insecticidal qualities. When ripe the large fruit each eject several large red seeds explosively to a distance of 30 feet.

Seeds yield an oil which some authorities believe is poisonous – while others state that it is edible (and it may be that the latter requires additional processing).

*Macrophylla* is made up of Greek *macro-* (large, long) and *phyllo-* (leaf) components meaning 'large-leaved'.

The fruit and seeds have been eaten locally in Ghana and Nigeria. Apart from being processed for their edible oil (used in Cameroon and Togo as well) Ghanaians and Nigerians both use the seeds for making bread too. In Ghana the pod ashes have offered a salt substitute. In Zaire the leaves are steeped before they are ground and cooked and the seeds are prepared like cassava (*Manihot esculenta*).

In Nigeria the seeds have been used as beads for making jewellery – while in Ghana the pod ashes already referred to have provided a mordant for use in dyeing.

The dry empty fruit pods have been used as cooking fuel.

This seed oil ((known as *Owala Oil* or *Owala Butter*) has not only been used as a lubricant but has also been an ingredient in the manufacture of soap and candles.

Apart from fuel, the wood has been used locally for turning and general carpentry, as well as for making cheap furniture. In Ghana and Nigeria they have made it into fencing and palings, and carved bowls and other household items from it. While in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo the wood has been made into charcoal.

Medicinally, a bark decoction has been applied to ulcers and sores according to local Nigerian treatments and prescribed in Ghana to enhance milk flow in nursing mothers or heal wounds. Then in Sierra Leone the bark has also been used for expelling worms. While Ibos in south-eastern Nigeria (and Ghanaians) ease convulsions (including epileptic fits experienced by babies), with smoke from the burning leaves, Cameroonians prefer to rely upon the fruit pod. Both Ghanaian and Nigerian medicine has resorted to crushed seeds for abortions – and Ghanaians have used the leaves and stem bark to ease diarrhoea.