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The cultural value of *Adansonia digitata* in Sagole community, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract. Most communities in Africa are transitioning from traditional culture to a western-orientated lifestyle. Traditionally throughout Africa, the baobab (*Adansonia digitata*) is venerated for its size and longevity, and as such are indelibly imbedded in culture. However, the shift in cultural identity and lifestyle has disconnected numerous communities across Africa from this iconic tree. Thus an investigation was conducted in the Sagole community, Limpopo Province, South Africa to ascertain the level of knowledge of, and cultural value this community still attach to the baobab. Results indicate that people aged 18-45 are not closely associated with tree species, and lacked significant cultural information. Only the older generation (older than 65 years) still had a strong cultural relationship. Elders from the community are the most knowledgeable with respect to cultural stories, and it is predominantly these elders that inform the younger generations regarding different culturally-bound stories related to the baobab tree. People of Sagole are not fully aware about taboos that relate to the baobab. This disconnect can be traced back to a society in transition from a traditional way of lifestyle to a western-orientated lifestyle, and the consequent uncoupling of generations. Ultimately this will lead to a significant loss of cultural information, cultural identity, cohesiveness of communities, and environmental degradation in the Sagole community.

Keywords. *Adansonia digitata*, cultural information transfer, cultural taboos

Introduction

Adansonia digitata (Baobab) is an iconic symbol in Africa. It is easily recognized and generally represents an object or idea with great cultural significance to a wide cultural group (Solovan et al., 2013). For this reason, baobabs are often protected and adult trees are seldom cut down (Ndabikunze et al., 2011), and thus referred to as the tree of life in Africa (Mwihomeke et al., 2009). Despite this, there is growing concern about the persistence of baobabs in many landscapes (Venter & Witkowski, 2010).

The naming of useful plants is an old and basic human urge (Zimmermann, 2010). In this regard, a local name for a plant often describes some characteristic feature of that plant or plant parts in which the communities have an interest (Singh, 2008). Vernacular names not only have information attached to it, but are also descriptive in nature. This information is often precise and helps infer certain character related details, such as appearance, shape, size, habitat, habit, smell, taste, colour, utility and other peculiar characters of plants (Osman, 2014).

In transitional societies, new generations may be less aware of heritage and local customs (Randler, 2008) due to a disconnect between the old and the new generations (McKewon, 2002). This breakdown in information transfer will eventually lead to a loss of cultural identity amongst community members (Osman, 2014), which will in the long-term negatively affect young people's ability to identify with traditional values associated with their own historical brand of culture (Bobo & Weladji, 2011).

Cultural taboos are defined as a vehement prohibition of an action based on the belief that such behaviour is either too sacred or too accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake, under threat of supernatural punishment. Such prohibitions are present in virtually all societies (Shaw, 1992). Cultural taboos have many functions that include, amongst others, norms (Alves, 2012). Norms are the agreed upon expectations and rules by which a culture guides the behaviour of its members in any given situation. Of course, norms vary widely across cultural groups (Frier & Bagnall, 1994). The value of cultural taboos associated with plant species is to preserve the species for future use by members in the communities (Solovan et al., 2013).

The Sagole community located in the Limpopo Province of South Africa is experiencing a significant cultural shift in terms of lifestyle and information. This is especially prevalent under the young generation. Thus in order to determine the cultural value of *A. digitata* in the Sagole community, the vernacular taxonomy, information transfer from older to younger generations, and cultural taboos related to *A. digitata* was investigated.

Methodology

Study site

Sagole community is located in an area along the northern border of South Africa in the Limpopo Province (Figure 1). The community depends on a subsistence economy. Here people rely on the natural vegetation and springs for livestock feeding. The traditional subsistence economy is dependent on rainfall (Rabie & Fuggle, 1992), with most common rain-fed crops being maize, peanuts, groundnuts and beans. Dry season and drought resistant cereals, such as sorghum and a variety of millet are also cultivated (Hellman & Ramsey, 2004).

The study site is situated within the savanna biome of South Africa. According to Mucina and Rutherford (2006), the vegetation is characterised by seven different vegetation types, including the Vhavenda Miombo, within which the Sagole community lies. Dominant species include *Afzela quansensis*, *Albizia adianthifolia*, *Burkea africana* and *Brachystegia spiciformis*. Mucina and Rutherford (2006) further noted that the area is not conserved, and thus heavily impacted by grazing, wood-collecting and slash agriculture. This has led to some alien species invading this area.

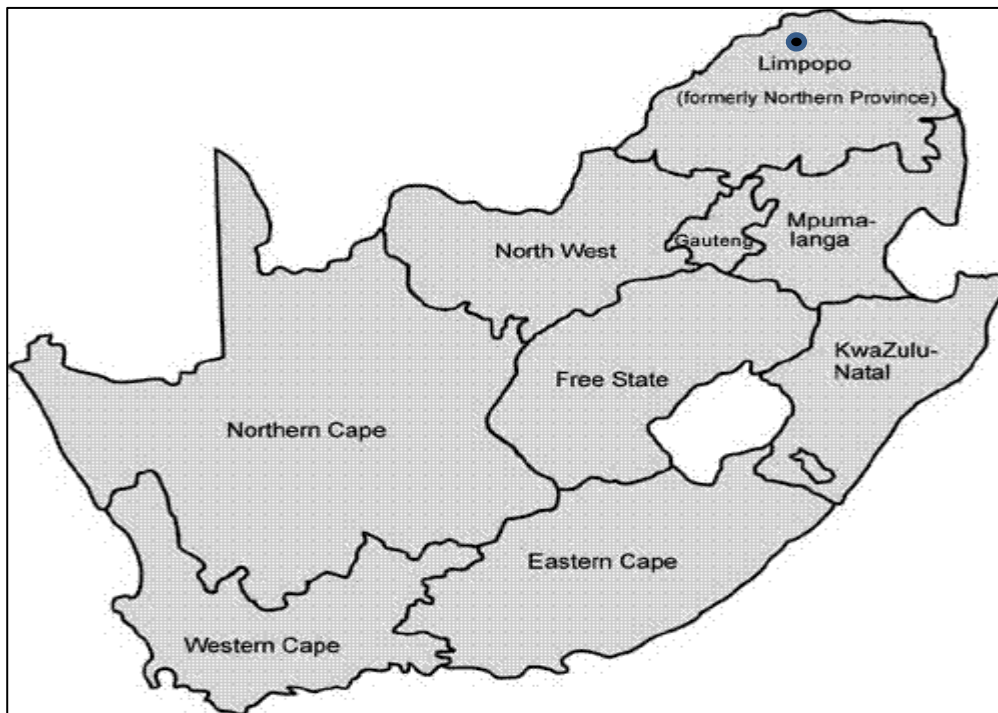


Figure 1. Location of Sagole community (dot) within South Africa (Ritchken, 1995).

Study population

The study was conducted between December 2014 and June 2015. To obtain permission to conduct research in the Sagole community, the local chief was consulted to explain the aim and objectives of research. According to the advice of the local chief the informants were selected. The selection of informants (n=12), aged 65 and older, was based on their reputation in the society regarding their knowledge about herbals medicine, plants and the traditional healthcare system. The other informants (15 men and 23 women, aged between 30 and 65 years) were selected via convenience sampling. The study population was Vhavenda people residing in the Sagole community. Consent was obtained from informants after the aim and objectives were explained to them. Five traditional health practitioners were also recruited through convenience sampling to participate in the study. Participation in the study was limited to the practitioners who resided in the Sagole community. Here consent was also obtained after explanation of the study objectives. Interviewees were interviewed via a semi-structured questionnaire. The research has been cleared by the University of Limpopo Ethical Research Committee.

Research design

The study is qualitative, exploratory enquiry into the cultural value and preservation of *A. digitata*. In qualitative research, the information obtained from participants is not expressed in numerical form. William (1998) defined qualitative research as a system of inquiry which seeks to build a holistic, largely narrative, description to inform the researcher's understanding of a social or cultural phenomenon.

Data collection

The primary [MG Mathaba] researcher interacted with the respondents throughout the study to collect data. This type of interaction was used for the researcher to achieve the same

level of knowledge and understanding as the study respondent. The interviews involved face-to-face interaction between an interviewer and interviewees, to build the kind of intimacy that is common for mutual self-disclosure. The interviews were conducted in the interviewees' households. The interactions were tape-recorded for best analysis of data transcripts.

The designed semi-structured questionnaire was first tested on a small sample (n=4) of respondents in the Sagole community. It was then adjusted before a final version was developed. The questionnaire was designed to collect information on the local names, folk taxonomy, transfer of information, and cultural taboos of this iconic tree. These data were descriptively analysed.

Results

Folk taxonomy - common names and their meaning

Nearly all (99%) the respondents in the Sagole community knew the common name for *A. digitata* as *Muvhuyu* in Tshivenda and baobab in English, and its meaning; the big tree.

Transfer of information

Ancient stories

Forty five percent of respondents were aware of ancient stories that revolve around this species. In this regard, community elders (older than 60 years) were the most knowledgeable section of the population. It is predominantly these elders that to some extent inform the younger generations (18-25 years) regarding different culturally-bound stories. Typical stories that elders tell, are for example, that during ancient time's baobab trees were used to hide during wars, and also that people used baobab boles to store water. Thirty percent of the younger generation knew these two stories. In another example, an elder would tell that during ancient times people used baobab trees as their God to worship. Fifty percent of the younger generation knew this story. Another typical story relate to the fact that during ancient times, Bushmen used baobab trees as "caves" during the night. Forty percent of the younger generation knew this story.

Value of ancient stories

Sixty percent of respondents believe that the value of ancient stories relating to *A. digitata* is to preserve culture, while 25% are of the option that ancient stories teaches valuable life lessons. In contrast, 15% believed that their value lies in entertainment.

Cultural taboos

Taboos related to *A. digitata*

Only 30% of the interviewees knew about taboos that relate to *A. digitata*. Those that knew indicated, for example, that if a pregnant woman consumes the fruit of a baobab she will suffer during childbirth, and it will also affect the health of her unborn child.

Value of taboos

Respondents who know of taboos that relate to the baobab believed that the value of taboos is to preserve culture (60%), while (25%) respondents believed that the value is to teach life lessons, only (15%) saw them as entertainment.

Transgression of taboos

The village head (Chief) in the Sagole community is not well informed about cultural taboos related to *A. digitata*. Consequently it was noted that when an individual transgress a

taboo related to *A. digitata*, he/she will not suffer any consequences from the traditional leaders or the village head of the community. Only 25% of the interviewed people (mostly the elderly) knew of any consequences related to the transgression of a taboo belonging to the baobab. These people indicated that persons who transgressed taboos associated with the baobab will encounter bad luck, and women will suffer during child birth.

Institutional practice of taboos

In the Sagole community institutional/cultural rules and regulations apply to *A. digitata*. These include for example, stripping of back often a month. Although community members were aware of these rules and regulations, some (especially the younger community members) do transgress them, with impunity. This is notwithstanding the fact that traditional leaders (mostly elders) in the community know about the associated taboos, and do try to inform younger community members about taboos related to *A. digitata*.

Discussion

Folk taxonomy

The study found that nearly all interviewed people (of all ages) in the Sagole community know the common name and its meaning of *A. digitata*. It is clear that when an entity, in this case *A. digitata*, plays a significant cultural role in the community it will be well-known. This is borne out in studies such as Baum (1995) from Madagascar where *A. digitata* is a very common tree that is ingrained into the culture of various communities, and where nearly all Madagascans know its vernacular name and meaning. In contrast, Kakati and Doulo (2012) found that in Tanzania only old people knew this tree species' vernacular name and meaning. Here this majestic tree plays a very minor role in the lives of communities. As such there is no closed bond between the people and this tree species.

Transfer of information

Ancient stories

The majority of respondents, especially the younger generations, are not well informed about cultural ancient stories that relate to the baobab. This phenomenon is not unique, as Shaw (1992) found a similar trend Zambia. This is in contrast to what Toure et al. (1998) found in Madagascar, where most people were highly aware of ancient stories focussing on the baobab. Thus it is clear that in societies where a traditional lifestyle is still evident and storytelling is still a strong cultural occurrence, that transfer of information between the old and new generation would take place. Our results are most probably reflective the result of a society in transition between an old traditional lifestyle (older generation who know about ancient stories) and a modern western-orientated lifestyle (younger generation who is not that informed about culturally-bound stories). This leads to a disconnection between generations, in addition to the loss of valuable cultural identity and ecological information. Possible remedial actions include, amongst other, the scientific documentation of the stories of baobab before they disappear.

Value of ancient stories

Sixty percent of the respondents believe that the value of ancient stories relating to *A. digitata* is to preserve culture. This group of respondents were mostly the elderly. The 25% of interviewees, who noted that ancient stories teach valuable life lessons, were again from the older generation. Thus it comes as no surprise that the 15% who believed that their value lies in entertainment, stemmed from the younger generation. This data is in line with Blench (2007) who found that it was generally the older people in Zambia who treasured ancient stories of the

baobab for their cultural value. This same phenomenon was also found by Wickens (1982) in Zimbabwe and Nigeria. The fact that it is generally the older generation, those older than 60 years, that are still the holders and ones who value ancient cultural stories, creates a long term cultural deficit in communities. These stories are very much culturally-bound and the value they bring to communities not only defines individuals, but also societies in general. Their loss would inflict irreparable cultural damage to the fabric of traditional communities. Instituting culturally-bound storytelling and focussing on their value to society at a very young age in for example day care centres would go a long way to arrest this alarming trend.

Cultural taboos

Taboos related to *A. digitata*

Depending on how close a community is associated with a cultural icon, such as the baobab tree, will determine how well-informed they are in terms of culturally-bound taboos (Palmer & Pitman, 2002). This is borne out in studies such as Ramesh et al. (1992) who found that various communities in Senegal still have a close and personal bond with the baobab tree. People in these communities were also very knowledgeable about taboos that relate to *A. digitata*. In contrast, Shaw (1992) found that in Mali people are not well informed about the taboos related to *A. digitata*. Here communities do not have a close association with this iconic African tree.

Because the majority (70%) of the interviewed people in the Sagole community were not well-informed about taboos related to *A. digitata*, it would seem that they, especially the younger generation, do not have a close and personal bond with the baobab tree. Ultimately, this lead to a loss of cultural identity in a community. The fact that only 30% of people (generally older people) knew about a taboo related to the baobab, and then only knew about one taboo, namely that if a pregnant woman consumes the fruit of the baobab she will suffer during childbirth, and that it will also affect the health of her unborn child, is alarming. This makes the scientific documentation of these taboos the more pressing. This study feeds into this initiative.

Furthermore, it is suggested that an awareness campaign in the Sagole community should be launched in educating people about taboos related to *A. digitata*. It could be easily done via the distribution of pamphlets to every household. A similar effort has paid dividends in the Ivory Coast. Here Alves (2012) found that the chief and knowledgeable old people organised an awareness campaign in educating people about cultural values and taboos related to species surrounding their villages, such as the Cinnamon and Camphor trees. In this awareness campaign they visited households where they met uninformed people. After this campaign people were very aware of cultural taboos and their values.

Value of taboos

If people are uninformed about taboos in their mist, then is not surprising that they will know little about its value (Kelly, 2000). This is illustrated in studies such as those of Baum and Oginuma (1994) and Solovan et al. (2013). Baum and Oginuma (1994) found that in areas of Mali people are not well informed about the values of taboos related to *A. digitata*, but again these people are not culturally close to this tree species. In contrast, Coe (2013) found that in Cameroon people are very knowledgeable of the value of taboos that relate to *A. digitata*, because these people's lives were intimately intertwined with this tree species. The fact that so few people (30% of Sagole interviewees) knew about taboos that relate to the baobab would indicate that they are generally not well informed on the value that taboos bring to society. This

necessitates workshops by youth organisations that emphasize the life values taboos bring to individuals.

It is suggested that the chief and elders take the lead and organise cultural events in the Sagole community, with the aim of sharing culturally-bound information. Bobo and Weladji (2011) found that in Madagascar such events organised by elders occurred in order to educate uninformed people on the importance of cultural values, especially of cultural icons such as the baobab. Such events in the Sagole community will be very helpful to the people in the community because the chief and the new generations are currently uninformed of cultural taboos related to *A. digitata*. This could be an opportunity to inform them about the taboos and also to value those taboos has in terms of preserving culture.

Transgression of taboos

If people are unaware about cultural taboos then it is very easy for them to unintentionally transgress them, a situation most prevalent in Sagole. The fact that even the village head is not well informed about cultural taboos that relate to *A. digitata* is cause for alarm. Thus it comes as no surprise that it was noted that when an individual transgress a taboo related to *A. digitata* he/she will not suffer any consequences from those in charge of the community. All of this stems from the fact that, especially the younger generation, has lost their cultural and spiritual connection to this iconic African species.

Due to the decline in traditional values in Africa, the issue of transgression taboos is all too common. Finding solutions for this phenomenon is not easy. However, Solovan et al. (2013) noted that in Cameroon when people transgressed taboos related to Almond trees, village heads played a decisive role. They were the ones dispensing punishment, usually in the form of fines, which resulted in the desired effect. In addition there was also an active programme by older people to transfer information about taboos to the younger generations. This had the effect of younger people starting to believe in taboos and understand their value to the community. Thus if the authoritative structures (chiefs and elders) could be strengthened in the Sagole community together with active programmes of information transfer, and the implementation of some form of punishment it could lead to a situation where taboos and their values are recognised as essential for community cohesion and well-being.

Institutional practice of taboos

The majority of the interviewed people in the Sagole community were not well informed about rules and regulations that govern their interaction with the baobab. This also goes for the chief in the community. Shaw (1992) found a similar trend in Mali, where people were also not well informed about institutional practices of taboos related to *A. digitata*. Here baobab trees do not play a major cultural role in the life of Malians. In Madagascar, where this tree is still regarded as a cultural icon, Ramesh et al. (1992), however, found that people were very educated about institutional practices of taboos that relate to the baobab. Thus it comes as no surprise that they mostly adhered to these rules and regulations. It is clear that significant education needs to be done in the Sagole community regarding the cultural and ecological value of this tree species to the people before a sense of attachment will develop. It is only when this attachment develops, that issues such as taboos and their values, which aids in the management and conservation of these trees, can be re-instituted and regulated.

In every community elders carry the responsibility to conserve the culture of their community, and to transfer information of heritage related issues to new generations in the community. In this regards, it is proposed that meetings be held with the current chief to inform him about the value of institutional practices of taboos. It is only once he is informed that

workshops can be organised with community members. Through workshops cultural ownership can be taken by the Sagole community that would ultimately lead to the long term preservation of this iconic tree species.

Conclusion

In general, the results clearly indicate that in the Sagole community, this majestic tree is not closely associated with the new generations and chief, as they were very uninformed about cultural issues related to this tree species. However, only the older generation still had a cultural relationship with the iconic tree. This disconnect can be traced back to a society in transition, from a traditional way of lifestyle to a western-orientated lifestyle, and the consequent uncoupling of generations. Ultimately this will lead to a terrible loss of cultural information and cultural identity in the Sagole community.

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