



★ **Baobab**

Beth Moon, Photographer

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Adrian Patrut, Contributor

Abbeville Press (Nov 23, 2021)

Hardcover \$49.95 (128pp)

978-0-7892-1409-6

Baobab is photographer Beth Moon's tribute to the magnificent, threatened trees upon which cultures and ecosystems depend.

When word came of a sacred baobab falling in Madagascar, Moon set aside several weeks to capture the trees' majesty in images. She supplemented her trip with visits to South Africa and Senegal. In her Ansel Adams-esque, black-and-white and sepia photographs, each knot and furrow stands out due to the high contrast, while low angles give a sense of scale. The trees are treated as individuals—some with nicknames and stories behind them, like an intertwined pair known as “The Lovers.” Another is half disintegrated, and the camera serves as a gentle chronicler of its decay. A triptych of photographs, each taken an hour apart, tracks changes in the light and clouds.

The book's portraits of human subjects are just as timeless. Moon writes about making an effort to greet strangers, and she gets glimpses of their interactions with the baobabs. In Madagascar, a chief invokes ancestors as he sprinkles rum on a trunk. In Senegal, she finds prayer parcels nailed to the bark and animal bones inside a hollowed trunk—evidence of ritual use by griots.

The book reveals that other species live in harmony with the trees, too: baobabs provide habitats for bats, which pollinate flowers, and Moon spots a python up in one tree. Her accompanying travel diary shares the rigors of her travels, including heat, jet lag, and language barriers, while the closing essay from Adrian Patrut reveals that, according to radiocarbon dating, some of the 100 million baobabs in Africa are hundreds of years old.

Today, baobabs are threatened by urbanization and climate change, and Moon finds a tree that collapsed after 1,200 years due to insufficient rain. In the face of such monumental losses, the photographs in *Baobab* amount to an “act of defiance.”

REBECCA FOSTER (November / December 2021)

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