

## UPDATE ON AGODI GARDENS

**D. Okali**

*Nigerian Environmental Study Action Team (NEST)  
No. 1. Oluokun Street, Old Bodija, Ibadan  
d\_okali@yahoo.com*

### **Background**

The Nigerian Field Society (NFS), through its Ibadan Branch, has long kept a close watch on the status of the Agodi Gardens, a recreational centre established by the Western Regional Government in 1957, as part of the Ogunpa Forest Reserve, now renamed Agodi Park and Gardens. The annual general meeting (AGM) of the Ibadan branch of the NFS in 2011 deliberated extensively on the information it received that the gardens had been partitioned ready for logging, with the risk of losing some of the endangered tree species it contained, and preparatory to selling the place for development as a government reservation area (GRA) estate. A member reported having heard that plots of land in the gardens were being sold for as much as ₦2 million each! This was outrageous considering that the national minimum wage of workers in the country is set at ₦18 000 per month. The major decision at that meeting was to intensify efforts to ascertain the facts and, if necessary, follow up with a vigorous campaign against conversion of the gardens for property development. This decision remained the main thrust of matters arising on the subject at subsequent annual general meetings of the Ibadan branch.

It was while implementing the decision to get more facts on what was happening at the Agodi Gardens that I approached Chief M.I. Okunola, the *Ekarun Balogun Bobajiro* of Ibadan, a distinguished retired public servant, who had a keen interest in nature and the welfare of Ibadanland. I reasoned that he must have been aware of what was happening in the Agodi Gardens. Chief Okunola certainly knew much about Agodi Gardens. He passed to me copies of a set of documents, mainly transactions of a group called Friends of Agodi Gardens (FAG), and a cutting from the Guardian Newspaper of 9 June 2001, together with a note which said: "On-going activities at Agodi Gardens are reported to be for fencing the park," and said that he would investigate further. Unfortunately, Chief Okunola passed on in October 2012, and we never got to know the outcome of his further investigation. But the documents he gave to me revealed that concern for the fate of Agodi Gardens had been intense for about ten years before the AGM of the Ibadan



branch in 2011. Friends of Agodi Gardens (FAG), chaired by the chairman of the Ibadan branch of the NFS at that time, Dr. D.O. Ladipo, and therefore presumably spearheaded by the society, had been formed to resist threats then to convert the gardens into an estate. Friends of Agodi Gardens, an association of non-government organizations, including the Nigerian Field Society, and concerned individuals, had petitioned the Oyo state government and was poised to mount a public campaign to stop the conversion. Among the documents passed to me by Chief Okunola was the government response to that petition from the office of the deputy governor, which, among other things, said:

*Although the idea of turning the land into GRA was earlier muted (sic) by some officials of the State government, I am to inform you that government has never given any approval to it and will never approve the de-reservation of Agodi Gardens.*

In circulating this government response to its members, the secretary of FAG congratulated the members “for being part of FAG and for successfully making it possible for sparing the life and integrity of the Agodi Gardens and environs.” He added “...it has become clear that the Agodi Gardens will soon become a model park, but this is still in its infancy.”

The government response and the perceptive, near prophetic, remark by the secretary of FAG about the gardens soon becoming a model park, should have rested this matter. But, because governments come and go and there was the possibility of policy reversal, and perhaps also because for over ten years after the government assurance no activity was noticed in the gardens, the Ibadan branch of the NFS was perhaps justified in being alarmed by the sudden spurt of activity — tree felling and boarding up of part of the gardens — it noticed in 2011.

### **Update**

Four years after the annual general meeting of the Ibadan branch of the NFS, where concern was raised again about the Agodi Gardens, this update was prompted by the need to quickly allay the fears of all concerned about the fate of the gardens. A visit to the gardens, now Agodi Park and Gardens in March 2015 provided the impetus, and much to crow about, for this update on the state of what is now truly “a model park... in its infancy.”

Following glowing remarks made about the gardens at a council meeting on 28 February 2015, I decided to take a chance and hold the birthday outing of my child at the gardens on 8 March 2015. I approached the gardens with considerable skepticism, holding that nothing good could come out of a government venture into creating an attractive



recreational facility. I had not taken seriously the information advertised on the billboard in front of the gardens, while work was going on there and we were worrying about what government was up to in the place. The advertisement on the billboard had made reference to the implementation of a public, private partnership (PPP) decision taken by the government, and I had not considered the full implication of this.



Figure 1. Car park of Agodi Park and Gardens, Ibadan.

Approaching the park, my first pleasant surprise was to find that a sizeable car park, with attendants, had been provided so that visitors did not have to park on the public highway and worry about the security of their cars. The entrance fee of ₦500 for ordinary visitors, and ₦1500 for visitors who also want to swim, seemed, before going into the park, to be on the high side. But this impression melted away on getting into the park and seeing the facilities. The only critical observation on the entrance arrangements that remained was the failure to use effectively the turnstile installed at the gate meant for proper recording and accounting for the number of visitors entering the park. Other than this, entry into the park immediately opened a vista of a well laid out recreational facility. A restaurant and a children's playground welcome the visitor into the park. There are well laid out lawns



Figure 2. Vista of Agodi Park and Gardens, Ibadan.

with paved paths criss-crossing them along the contours in natural user-friendly patterns.

Signposts direct the visitor to the facilities. The most welcome observation is that the trees, planted a long time ago in the gardens, the preservation of which had been of most concern to the society and friends of Agodi Gardens, are intact, in groves of indigenous (e.g., *Triplochiton scleroxylon*, obeche) or exotic (e.g., *Eucalyptus sp.*) trees, strategically preserved at locations throughout the park.





Figure 3a. A signpost.



Figure 3b. A preserved grove of *Triplochitan scleroxylon* (obeche) Agodi Park & Gardens, Ibadan.

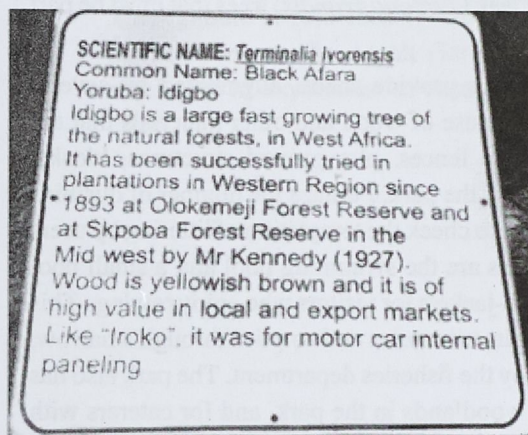


Figure 4. Detailed label for a tree in Agodi Park and Gardens, Ibadan.

In fact, most trees in the park were labelled with their scientific and vernacular names, and, for some, historical details of their origin.

Against this full treatment and display of trees, however, is the yet undeveloped zoological section of the park, where a few animals (including a lion, a monkey and a parrot) are still held in their old garden locations, enclosures or

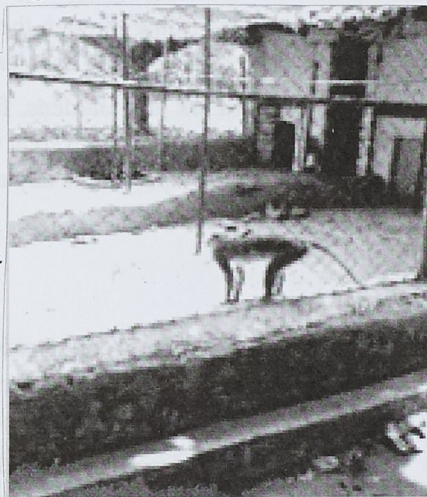


Figure 6. A monkey in a cage in the old zoo.





Figure 6a. Swimming pool.



Figure 6b A rowing pool.

cages, close to a thickly forested valley of teak (*Tectona grandis*) trees that must be part of the Ogunpa Forest Reserve.

Scattered trees on the well-manicured lawns provide shade, augmented by several kiosks, for use by picnickers. Of note is the use of wood and other materials that are adequately treated for outdoor use, for the fences, play-ground structures, kiosks, signposts and dustbins strategically placed in the park. Perhaps the number of dustbins distributed in the park needs to be increased to check the temptation of littering by users of the park. Distinct recreational attractions are the swimming pool and a small pool with a fountain and boats equipped with life-jackets for visitors who enjoy rowing. This latter pool is fed by the Ogunpa River and its tributaries and empties through a narrow, unkempt canal into the old Ogunpa Lake by the fisheries department. The park also has a provision for horse riding through the woodlands in the park, and for caterers with barbecue and ice-cream spots to augment its own restaurant facilities.

Altogether, Agodi Park and Gardens, far from the fears entertained by the NFS and concerned citizens, is a delectable sight to behold, a very welcome recreational facility in Ibadan, arguably comparable to any anywhere else, bearing in mind that it is yet "a model park... in its infancy."

### Lessons

1. We learn from the Agodi Gardens experience that it is worth persisting with civil society pressure on government, to bring about the management of the environment for the greater good of the public. This is not to downplay the equal importance of having a listening and discerning government. We hope



that government quickens the pace of extending the development of the zoological section of the park, to fully house and display animals of different kinds. It is recommended also that the present and subsequent governments sustain the effort of maintaining Agodi Gardens as a model park. The NFS, on its part, could apply the strategy it has used here in addressing other seemingly intractable environmental management challenges, such as urban waste management. Civil society pressure, led by the NFS, could be used to force government policy on at least the use, collection and recycling of water packaging material.

2. Although it may be too early to be definitive, the indications are that the private, public partnership (PPP) approach can be successful in managing an environmental facility as a business. Left to government alone, the business aspect of such management could be bogged down by excessive bureaucracy. Closer liaison with relevant government units is needed for better understanding of policy to inform and guide civil society action.
3. There should be reference to past records of the Ibadan Branch of the NFS on deliberations on the Agodi Gardens. This is as a way of maintaining the continuity of experience of members to minimize avoidable duplication of effort.