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The Moruga Silk Cotton Tree: Grandest of them All

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NATURE NOTE

The Moruga Silk Cotton Tree: Grandest of them All

Ceiba pentandra (silk cotton or kapok, family Bombacaceae), reaches a height of 60 m and is the tallest tree in Trinidad and Tobago (Quesnel and Farrell 2000). It is the tallest tree in the Amazon rain forest (www.tropilab.com) and tropical Africa (Watson and Dallwitz 1992). The silk cotton with its massive, wide spreading, plank-like buttresses inspires awe in some and fear in others. Legends abound about this tree which is reputed in local folklore to be a haven for jumbies and frequented by practitioners of spiritism. The ancient Mayas considered the tree to be sacred and today the Maroons and Amerindians share that tradition (www.tropilab.com). *Ceiba pentandra*, though scattered throughout the forests of Trinidad and Tobago, does not occur in pure stands (Beard 1946). In 1983, during a field trip of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club to Moruga Bouffe, David Rooks, an ornithologist and a past president of the Club, mentioned that the largest tree he had seen was a silk cotton in a section of the nearby mora (*Mora excelsa*) forest. They did not see the tree at that time.

Glenn Wilkes, returned on 22 January, 1984, and made an attempt, using triangulation, to estimate the height of the Moruga silk cotton. He failed because he could not see the topmost branch.

A second attempt was made on 14 May 1984, when Glenn Wilkes returned on foot with Victor Quesnel and Frankie Farrell in a helicopter above. A rope was lowered from the hovering helicopter, and when it touched the ground, the rope was cut at the level of the top of the tree. This gave a height of 56 m. Mora trees attain a height of of 45 m and it was assumed that this mora canopy was 45 m. Therefore, the silk cotton was 11 m above the canopy.

On 21 July, 2002, the authors set off to measure the girth of the Moruga silk cotton. The tree has nine massive buttresses to support its giant trunk. The tallest one is 13 m high. The plan was to cut two long poles, secure a tape measure firmly to one pole and loosely to the other, which would then be carried around the tree. This took three hours as the tree is closely surrounded by thick forest and it was necessary to prevent the tape from getting entangled among hanging lianas, epiphytes and the branches of under-storey trees. The circumference measured 10.3 m just above the buttresses. We also measured a hexagonal perimeter at 1.7 m above the ground on the six most prominent buttresses. This perimeter was 27.2 m.

This silk cotton thrives in a well-watered area with a thick mat of decaying vegetation. It appears to be in excellent shape, with no healed over scars and no indications that it has started rotting from within (21 July, 2002). The tree is probably no more than 200 years old.

We hope this report will encourage others to record the girth and height of giant silk cottons and any uncommonly large trees.

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