



SILK COTTON TREE

(*Ceiba pentandra*)

The tree has a large girth and can grow to 40 m. It is native to tropical America and the West Indies but has been introduced into most tropical countries.

The cotton tree is deciduous and its branches start far up on the trunk. The roots are buttressed (see illustration) in older trees. The leaves are palmate and each has about six or seven sections. The flowers come out in ivory-coloured clusters in January and February. They develop into pods 10 to 30 cm long which, when mature, open to reveal a white-brown silky fibre that resembles cotton; this is called kapok, also the other name for this tree. Kapok fibre is more buoyant than a cork and was used for stuffing life-saving canoes.

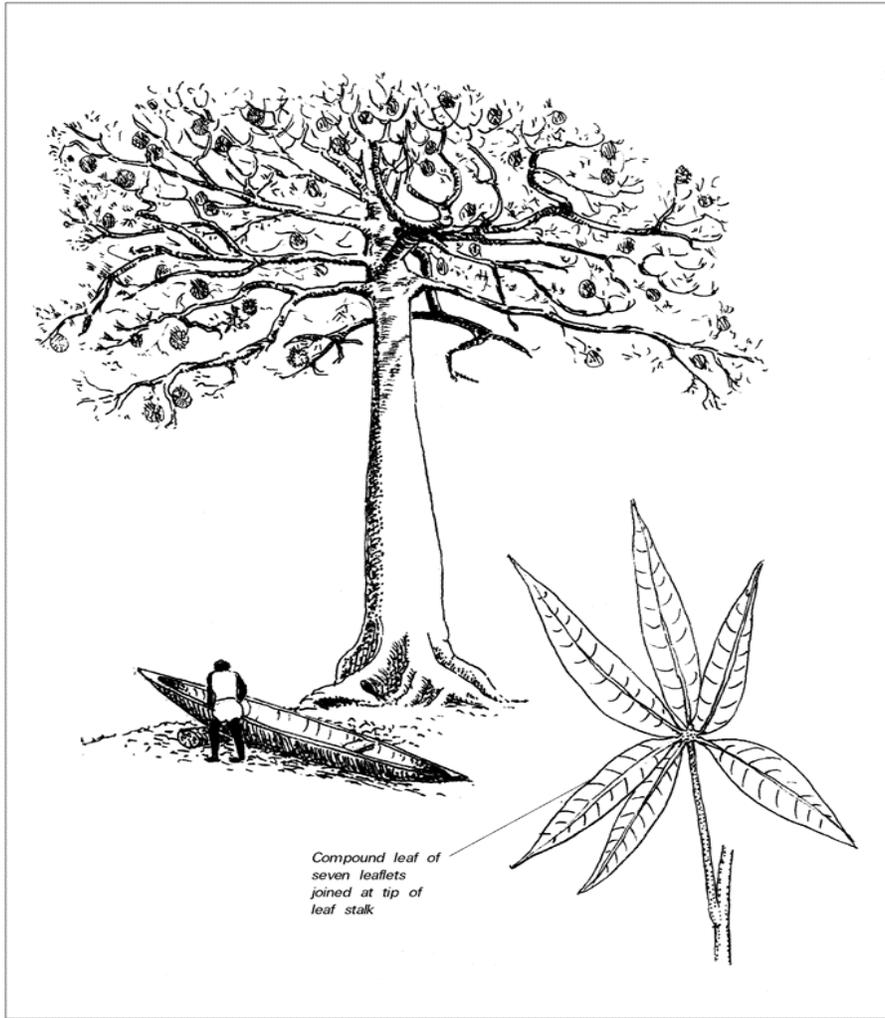
The silk cotton tree, with its thick trunk was once used extensively to make canoes. It can grow to altitudes about 800 m but is often found in our dryer coastal areas. Today, only few large cotton trees remain and these are still being harvested for making canoes.

Traditionally the cotton tree is regarded as the home of duppies or spirits. It is a sacred tree in the Maya's culture, and in Central American Indian groups. Here in Jamaica, before cutting down a tree to make a canoe, a man will propitiate the 31 spirits with a libation of white rum sprinkled around its roots.

A very large beetle, the giant metallic wood borer (*Euchroma gigantea*) lays its eggs on the barks of the silk cotton tree and the grubs that hatch feed on the dead bark of the tree. This beetle is about 5 cm long and has iridescent powder-like scales on its tough wings.

SILK COTTON TREE (*Ceiba pentandra*)

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| Family: Bombacaceae | Species: <i>Ceiba pentandra</i> | Author: (L.) Gaerth., Fruct. & Sem. |
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| Height: 40m | Habitat: Sea level-800m | Persistence: Deciduous |
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