

The tree Zacchaeus climbed

The fig tree remains important today, just as it was in biblical times

By Francis Gachathi



Cattle trough made from *Ficus sycamorus* wood. (Photo: KEFRI)



Cows drink from a trough made of *Ficus sycamorus* wood. (Photo: KEFRI)

The fig tree and its fruit, also called the fig, are mentioned several times in the Bible. Adam and Eve used the leaves of the fig tree to sew garments for themselves when they realised they were naked (Genesis 3:7). Figs were one of the foods produced in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 8:8). They were used in the healing of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:7). In the New Testament, Jesus cursed a fig tree for bearing no fruit (Mark 11:12-14) and used the seasonal leaf-shedding of the fig tree as a sign of His Return (Matthew 24:32-35). Zacchaeus climbed the sycamore fig in order to see Jesus (Luke 19:4).

The fig tree belongs to the genus *Ficus*, a genus of about 850 species of trees, shrubs and vines in the mulberry family *Moraceae*. The trees are native to the tropics with a few found in the warm temperate regions.

Fig trees are easily recognised in the field. All produce abundant milky latex when cut, and many have aerial roots. The twigs have paired stipules¹ encircling the stem. The stipules fall off early, leaving a circular scar round the stem. Figs are borne in leaf-axils, on main branches or the trunk of the tree, fleshy, globular or pear-shaped with a small opening (the ostiole) at the outward end that allows access to pollinators since the flowers are actually inside the fig.

The flowers are pollinated by specific wasps, known as fig wasps, which crawl through the opening in search of a suitable place to lay their eggs. Technically, figs are not true fruits as developed from the ovary. They are derived from a complete inflorescence (syconium), flowers and seeds growing together to form a single mass.

Naturally, most fig trees begin life as epiphytes² and stranglers. Seeds borne by birds or other dispersal agents germinate in the forks of other trees, dropping aerial roots all around the host tree and shading out its crown to smother it completely. The fig becomes a living shell around the dead tree. Some species are known to split the host.

¹ A stipule is an outgrowth on one or both sides (sometimes absent) of the base of the leafstalk.

² An epiphyte is a plant that grows on another using it as support only.



The fruit of *Ficus sycamorus* (Photo: KEFRI)



The fig is enveloping the host to the point of strangling it. (Photo: KEFRI)



The fruit of *Ficus thonningii* (Photo: KEFRI)

Fig trees are, however easily propagated from cuttings. They are believed to conserve soil moisture and increase fertility in their immediate vicinity.

In Kenya, there are about 30 indigenous species of the fig tree, very widespread from moist forests, bush land, rocks and cliffs, to riverine and high groundwater habitats in the drylands. There are also a number of exotic species cultivated as ornamentals that include the popular java fig, *F. benjamina* and the rubber fig, *F. elastica*.

Fig trees are regarded as objects of worship and places for offering sacrifices. They are revered in religion and considered haunts of ancestral

spirits in different parts of the world, figuring conspicuously in mythology, art and idioms in different cultures. *F. thonningii* (mugumo) and *F. sycamorus* (mukuyu, the sycamore tree), for example, are venerated as sacred by many communities in Kenya including the Kamba, the Kikuyu, the Meru, the Pokot and the Maasai. *F. benghalensis* (banyan) and *F. religiosa* (pipal) are sacred to Hindus and Buddhists in India.

The wood of the fig tree is generally light and soft, and since it has latex, it is unsuitable for use in the construction industry and for fuel. For these reasons in particular, fig trees remain where forests have disappeared and they are put into numerous local uses. The soft wood of

F. sycamorus and *F. sur*, for example, is used to make beehives, stools, canoes, grain mortars, cattle troughs, drums, doors, carvings and various household containers and utensils such as bowls, beer pots and spoons.

F. natalensis (mutuba in Luganda) is the chief source of bark-cloth, still used in cultural ceremonies in Uganda. Other species with useful bark fibre for making cord and baskets include *F. bussei* known as mugandi by the Giriama, *F. thonningii* and *F. tremula* known as uzi (thread, fibre) in Swahili.

The common fig, *F. carica* which is native to the Middle East, has been cultivated for its fruit since ancient times and remains a crop of economic importance in countries like Turkey and Egypt. Figs from most wild fig trees are edible. They are important food resources for wildlife including bats, birds and monkeys, which act as dispersal agents.

Fig leaves are important dry season fodder. The very rough leaves of *F. capreifolia* and *F. exasperata* are used as sandpaper, very effective in smoothing wooden objects. In India and Indonesia, rubber is harvested from the native rubber fig, *F. elastica*.

In Kenya, the milky latex is used as medicine for skin swellings in people and livestock, for attaching feathers to arrows and for making bird lime. As can be seen, the genus *Ficus* is an important one, not only in biblical times and countries, but also currently and worldwide.

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