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MORACEAE TREES IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF BORNEO PEOPLE

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Trees in the Moraceae family have played a central role in the religious life and mythology of Borneo peoples. This family of trees includes the strangling figs (*Ficus*), the poisonous ipoh tree (*Antiaris toxicaria*), and members of the genus *Artocarpus*, which includes such fruit trees as the terap, tekalong, breadfruit, chempedak and jack-fruit. Members of the family are distinguished by having a sticky white latex in all plant parts, minute unisexual flowers without petals and usually aggregated into heads, usually simple alternate leaves leaving circular scars on the twigs, fleshy fruit, and often smooth light bark with lenticels. In this essay, the religious myths of Borneo will be presented and then considered in relation to religious practices found outside of Borneo. The source of this information is from published material and interviews with Borneo people.

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Fig trees (*Ficus*)

Many native peoples in Borneo believe that spirits ("antu") live in strangling fig trees. These trees begin life as a seed defecated by birds or other animals on the branches of a host tree. The seed germinates and fig roots grow down the trunk of the host tree and branches grow into the canopy of the host tree. The basketwork of fig roots which surrounds the host tree trunk eventually kills the host tree, leaving the fig tree standing by itself. Many fig trees send down dangling aerial roots from their branches which will develop into thickened pillar roots when the root establishes itself in the ground (Corner 1940). The fig fruit is unusual in that tiny flowers are produced inside the fleshy spherical fruit, and these flowers are pollinated by specialized wasps which enter and leave the fig through the small opening at the fig mouth.

The Embaloh people are part of the "Maloh" Dayak complex of people in the Upper Kapuas of West Kalimantan. They believe in a "antu sakong," which lives in the jungle in hollow trunks of banyan fig trees, caves, and holes (King 1976). This spirit, which is human in form, captures the spirit of men by entering the body. The spirit is also said to attack men with sharp weapons, after which it eats the human flesh. This spirit is always around on days of "hot rain", rain falling while the sun is out.

The Ibans (Sea Dayaks) of Sarawak believe that spirits live in strangling figs (Roth 1896). These ghosts may sometimes be the soul of a living person. These ghosts are as tall as trees, with pointed heads, flat noses, teeth like