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The Ceibas of Central America: Managua, Nicaragua



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Ceiba pentandra is of utmost importance as a landscape feature in Central America. During the last five years wife Sharon and I have located over 4,900 planted in cultural settings. They are found at sacred sites (churches, cemeteries, shrines), around government and ceremonial buildings, in parks, at entrances to settlements, at bridges, at crossroads, and along roadsides. Only one country study has been completed: the case of Honduras is presented as "*The Ceiba Trees of Honduras, a Cultural Geography, Homage to Luis Adolfo Sánchez (1958-2020)*." A pdf can be seen and downloaded from williamvdaavidson.com

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Managua is selected for the second Central American ceiba report.

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Ceibas are deep in the ethos of Nicaragua. Ceiba toponyms cover the country – named for fincas, aldeas and caserios, streams and hills. No less than 140 places, named for the tree, can be found on the 1/50,000 maps of the Instituto Geográfico Nacional. The trees have been strategically planted along highways, often marking bridges. Many of Nicaragua's most prominent writers have chosen the ceiba for their poems, novels (Sirias 2009), and anthologies (Arellano 1971: 2-39; Cuadra D. 1973). Incer (2007: 92) noted that the ceiba at historic Hacienda San Jacinto was used to illustrate the "Himno al Arbol."

My favorite ceiba prose comes from Pablo Antonio Cuadra (1912-2002) who begins his book on seven Nicaraguan trees with the ceiba. *Siete Arboles contra el Atardecer y otros poemas* (Caracas: Imprenta Nacional y San José: Libro Libre) is from 1987. A bilingual edition, *Seven Trees against the Dying Light* (Translated by Greg Simon and Stephen F. White. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press) is from 2007.

" . . . The tree was born in the center of the world. From its highest branches you see what your heart longs for.

This is the tree that lovingly cradles your childhood on its lap. With the light, silky cotton of its fruit, your people made the pillows on which they rest and shape their dreams.

This is the Mother Ceiba in whose swelling trunk your people honored birth and fertility.

From a single piece of its white, easily carved wood, they built a vessel that is their cradle when their journey begins and their coffin when they reach port.

From this tree, humanity learned mercy and architecture, order and how to give with grace."

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What follows is, mostly, the result of a 2010 survey in Managua.

Managua

Managua is prime territory for ceiba growth. Unlike some other Central American capitals, the physical geography of Managua is perfect natural environment for ceibas. Most of the city lies between 55 m (at lake shore) and 250 m above sea level and has decent rainfall and tropical temperatures year-round. While most of the 140 or so urban ceibas have been planted in cultural context, perhaps one-fifth of them are remnants of natural propagation; another one-half are within 50 meters of main thoroughfares -- the Panamerican Highway and the Carretara Masaya/Avenida Bolivar roadways. Among the Central American capitals, **Managua most prominently distinguishes itself because of its roadside ceibas. Seventy percent of roadside ceibas in Central American capitals are in Managua.**

Table 1. Ceibas in capitals of Central America, as of June, 2021.

Capitals	Ceibas	Church/ Cemetery	Sports/ Parks	Govt./Mil., Educ., Bus. Tourism	Transportation: roads, entry, traffic circle, bus sta., airport	Water: bridge,vado, dock, vega	Private spared: home/farm
Tegucigalpa	434	8/14	2/24	260/37/12/1	15/4/0/3/3	4.0.0.18	29/0
San Salvador	174	6/46	9/52	14/9/11/3	7/2/8/1/0*/1	0/0/0/0/2	3/0
Managua	144	14/11	2/5	1/27/2/0	62/1/2/0/1/0	0/0/0/0/1	15/0
Guatemala	63	3/0	1/28	5/10/3/0	3/0/3/1/3/1	0	2/0
San Jose	41	3/4	3/12	4/6/3/0	0/0/0/0/2/0	0/0/0/0/3	1/0
Belmopan	16	0/0	1/0	0/3/0/1	0/1/0/0/0*/0	1/0/0/0/0	4/5
Panama	15	0/0	0/6	8/1/0/0	0	0	0
Totals	887	34/75	18/127	292/93/31/5	87/8/13/5/9/2	5/0/0/0/24	54/5

*Major airports for San Salvador and Belmopan are not at capitals. Comalapa has seven ceibas; Belize City has five.

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The Managua Field Survey.

During June 2010, accompanied by Jaime Incer Barquero and the late Roberto Sánchez Ramírez (d. Nov. 19, 2016), the well-known historian of Managua, a survey of the ceibas in the city was conducted. Roberto is remembered fondly for his quaint saying: “Managua es fea, pero yo la quiera” (Sánchez 2008). Jaime, of course, is known as the modern “El Sabio” of the country; the modern Alexander von Humboldt -- because of his encyclopedic knowledge of his native land and contributions in numerous academic fields. We visited the best known sites. With a few exceptions all were older trees, perhaps 70 years or more.

Roberto considered the ceiba as “the tree of Managua,” a symbol of the city, although no tree appears on its *escudo*. However, in Managua, where places rarely have addresses, sites are often described and located in relation to the nearest ceiba, a clear indication of its role in the urban ethos. The tree is celebrated widely on the last Friday of June each year, the Nicaraguan “*día del árbol*.”

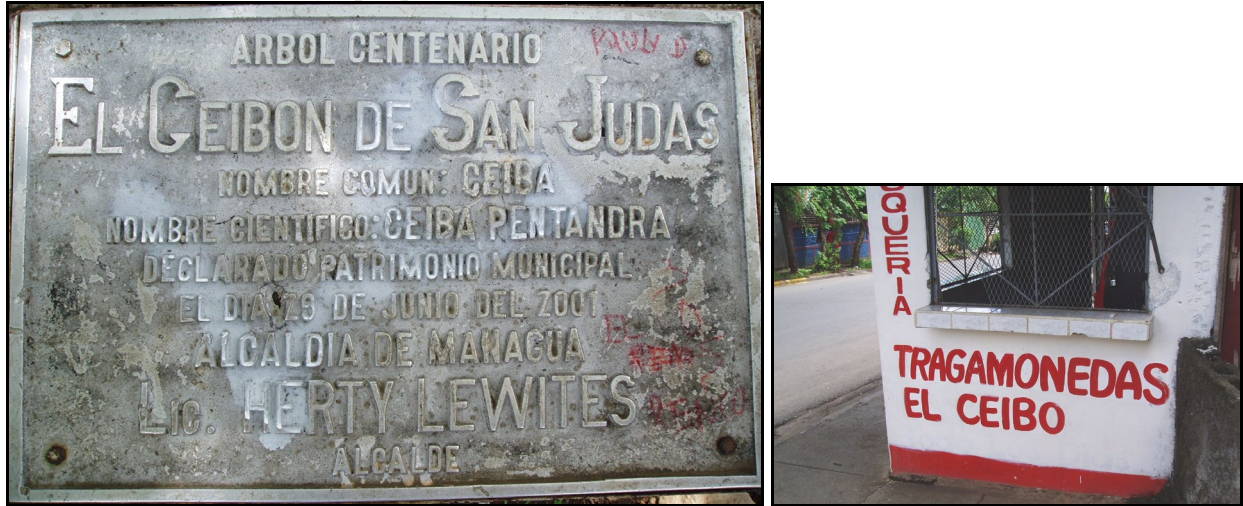
Our 2010 route:

Foremost on the minds of my guides was “El Ceibón del barrio San Judas.” In 2001 the “*gigante*” was selected by the Alcaldía de Managua as “Arbol Centenario” (Figures 1, 2.) On the west side of avenida San Judas, the tree is situated along the old route into the city from the southwest. Commercial signs within the barrio reflect the prominence of the ceiba.

Figures 1, 2. Jaime and Robert at El Ceibón, 2010.



Figures 3, 4. San Judas ceiba plaque; commercial sign nearby.



Nearby, eight blocks due north at the water pumping station Julio Martín, in barrio Esperanza, another ceiba had been planted, about 25 years ago.

Figure 5. The ceiba of Julio Martín, 2010.



To the east, in an alley near the Holiday Inn and Casino Majestic, a large ceiba has grown so that it almost blocks the driveway. Resident informants did not know who planted the tree. One neighbor of the barrio (Casimiro Sotelo) said he thought it was “natural.”

Figure 6. The alley ceiba of barrio Sotelo, 2010.



On a northern jaunt we visited the ceiba at the north end of the soccer field at Santo Domingo high school, the north end of the Luis A. Velasquez baseball field, and the famous concentration of six ceibas at “Quinta Niña” north of the Panamerican Highway, near Lake Managua in district six. Isolated but prominent single ceibas were found in Barrio María Auxiliadora (avenida Honduras at calle México) and at “El Ceibón” del barrio Venezuela.

Figures 7; 8. The ceibas of Barrio María Auxiliadora; Barrio Venezuela, 2010.



The famous Carretera a Masaya that runs north – south through the city hosts several ceiba sites: South of Laguna de Tiscapa, the volcanic lake in central Managua, four large ceibas have been planted south and west of the major intersection; next, to the south, behind the too modern Catedral Metropolitana, are twelve ceibas aligned with the northern property line. Apparently they were planted in 1993 at the time of the construction of the new cathedral. The very plain, but large, cement structure was paid in major part by the Domino Pizza U. S. owner, Tom Monaghan. Its austere, architectural style, with innumerable miniature domes, continues to draw unfavorable comments among *capitaliños*. It is nicknamed “La Chichona” because of its tit-like cupolas. The other prominent plantings on the grounds of the cathedral – some 500 coconut palms – are suffering. Only forty percent remain as of June 2017.

Figures 9, 10. Ceibas forming the northern boundary of National Cathedral, Managua, 2005.



After crossing Pista Juan Paul II, heading on to the south, on the east just before La Union grocery store and Pellas’s bank is a 20 year old ceiba; at Galerías Santo Domingo on Carretera Masaya, in the south side parking lot, a large, broad ceiba about 60 years old, has been spared atop an eight foot high platform left after the excavation and leveling of land during mall construction (January 2009); nearby, just north of the Galeria, at the rotunda Jean Paul Genie, a sapling was planted in 2007, now overwhelmed by two large “Trees of Life.”



Figure 11. The Pella ceiba, 2010.

Figures 12, 13. Galerias Santo Domingo parking lot ceiba, night and day, 2010



Figure 14. Av. Jean P. Genie at Prisma



On mapping the distribution of ceibas in Managua contextual patterns and geographical clusters emerged.

Las Ceibas de Managua, a listing.
(Elevations: 55 – 250 meters above sea level)
Present Ceibas [144]

Churches (14): Catedral Metropolitana de la Purísima Concepción (12), Esquipulas (2), the black Christ church just south of the municipal border along the Masaya Highway, which is fronted by two large ceibas (Davidson 2012: 159).

Cemeteries (11): Cementerio San Pedro (3), Ciudad Sandino sur (3), Cementerio General (2), Santo Domingo de las Serritas (2), Oriental (1).

Parks/Sports (7): Parques El Dorado (1), USSR (1), Valle Dorado (1), Marta Quesada (1), escuela Santo Domingo soccer field (1), Velásquez baseball field (1), arboretum nacional Carmelo Palma (1).

Universities (27): UNAN (22), apparently a remnant of probably naturally propagated trees on the open lands of Santa Feliciano, the ancient hacienda of Anastacio Somoza, the President of Nicaragua until July 1979 (Marengo 2002); UAM (3), east of the building complex, behind COBRISA II; and UCA (2), a sapling planted just inside the main entrance off Juan Pablo II across from the bus terminal for Granada. Aside from the Rotunda Jean Paul Genie sapling, this is probably the most recent planting of a ceiba in Managua. Another ceiba is in the UCA arboreto.

Private Individuals (15): Residencial Bolonia (5), Col. Quinta Niña (6), bo. Casimiro Sotelo (1), bo. Maria Auxiliadora (1), bo. Venezuela (1), bo. Marta Quesada (1).

Spared, northwest lakeside: (1)

Government: Julio Martín pumping station (1).

Industrial/Businesses (2): La Union grocery, Carr. Masaya (1), Galerías Santo Domingo (1).

Roadways, intersections, medians/rotundas (65): Panamerican Highway, airport to Quinta Niña (20), Carr. Masaya – Avenida Bolívar (32), Blvd. Jean Paul Genie (4), Laguna de Tiscapa (4), rotunda Jean Paul Genie (1), rotunda Hugo Chávez [antes Colón] (1), barrio San Judas (1), entry/exit ceiba, northwest carr. a León hwy 156 (1), Bo. Nuevo, Ciudad Sandino (1).

Airport: (1)

Past Ceibas (year of death, number) [2]

Iglesia San Antonio (2005, 1); San Antonio, whose ceiba survived the 1972 earthquake only to be lost during the renovation of the site as Parque San Sebastián, now without a ceiba (see Flores D. 2005: 84), Mercado Oriental (2008, 1).

Within a few blocks to the south and west of Laguna Tiscapa, primarily in Residencial Bolonia, are nine large ceibas. In this zone are the “Calle La Ceiba” (misnamed by Google Earth as “La Ceisa”) and Hotel La Ceiba. Nearby in Marta Quesada a resident has planted one in her backyard (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Private backyard ceiba, barrio Marta Quesada.



Managua northwest has five places of ceiba significance. The most prominent is at the northwest exit/entrance to Managua along highway 156 to León. A ceiba on the side side of the road, next to Tropigas de Nicaragua, S. A., has the distinction of being precisely on the municipal boundary (Figure 16). One might even suspect that when delimiting the common Ciudad Sandino - Managua border the ceiba was a demarcating feature. In 2008, on June 27, “Dia del Árbol” in Nicaragua the Alcaldía renovated the plaque below this ceiba, which previously had been named “Ceiba centenario” (Alcaldía 2008).

In 2010, Barrio Nuevo became a notorious section of Ciudad Sandino because of a street gang known as “Los de Ceibo.” They congregated beneath the giant tree where avenue 87 NW and 13th street NE meet in one of Managua’s poorest neighborhoods (*La Prensa* 2010: 6b). In figure 17 the ceiba towers in the background over the Sandino statuary at the entrance to the town from the highway to León.

Figures 16, 17. Managua northwest ceibas: at urban boundary on highway 156; main ceiba of Ciudad Sandino appear in distance above entry statue of Sandino.



Three of other ceibas, all small, have been planted in the southern section of the municipal cemetery in zona 2 of Ciudad Sandino. There is another at the cancha in Parque Valle Dorado near Cuesta del Plomo just north off 156. A final tree is lakeside north of the exit ceiba on 156 (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Lakeside ceiba of northwest Managua, 2008.



Finally, perhaps the most remarkable and famous ceiba of Managua was the very large shade tree of the northern sector of the Mercado Oriental in barrio Los Angeles (see air photo from 1991). In 2008 it had to be removed when it became a danger to the overcrowded and expanding enterprise. Of the eight markets in Managua, only this one is often called *tianguis* (the ancient Nahuatl term for market). It is the largest open air market in Central America, covering over 150 manzanas, or 105 hectares (260 acres).

Figure 19. Air photograph of the ceiba of Mercado Oriental, 1991. Top of photo is to the southwest.



Since the 2010 survey, *old* ceibas have had to compete with a *new*, artificial, trees in the Managua landscape. Beginning in 2013 the major landscape icon of the city has become the colorful, oversized metallic “Trees of Life” promoted by President Ortega’s wife, Rosario Murillo. At last count, 134 have been erected along Managua thoroughfares (Fendt 2015). However, some of these have been destroyed by students protesting during the recent civil unrest (Petriello and Joslin 2019: 203).

Figures 20, 21. “Trees of Life” in the rotunda Hugo Chávez, 2015; April 2018..



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