



Nature, Culture, and Big Old Trees: Live Oaks and Ceibas in the Landscapes of Louisiana and Guatemala

Kit Anderson

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Big old trees inspire our respect and even affection. The poet Walt Whitman celebrated a Louisiana live oak that was solitary "in a wide flat space, / Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near." Groves and alleys of live oaks remain as distinctive landscape features on Louisiana's antebellum plantations, while massive individuals still cast their shade over churches, graveyards, parks, and roads. Cajuns have adopted the "Evangeline Oak" as one of their symbols. And the attachment that Louisianians feel for live oaks is equaled by that of Guatemalans for ceibas, the national tree of Guatemala. Long before Europeans came to the Americas, the ceiba, tallest of all native species, was the Mayan world tree, the center of the universe. Today, many ceibas remain as centers of Guatemalan towns, spreading their branches over the central plaza and marketplace.

In this compelling book, Kit Anderson creates a vibrant portrait of the relationship between people and trees in Louisiana and Guatemala. Traveling in both regions, she examined and photographed many old live oaks and ceibas and collected the stories and symbolism that have grown up around them. She describes who planted the trees and why, how the trees have survived through many human generations, and the rich meanings they hold for people today. Anderson also recounts the natural history of live oaks and ceibas to show what human use of the landscape has meant for the trees. This broad perspective, blending cultural geography and natural history, adds a new dimension to our understanding of how big old trees and the places they help create become deeply meaningful, even sacred, for human beings.

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