FigBark Cloth

Ficus natalensis

Code: XIM-T-008 **Location:** XIM University Campus **Local / Vernacular name:** ଅଳଙ୍କାରକି ବର ଗଛ

Description

XIM University campus biodiversity register (2026–27). Recorded individuals: 1; abundance rank: 47.

Botanical Details

Leaf habit: Evergreen (in moist climates) to semi-deciduous (in drier regions) Flowers / Fruits: The Black cloth fig, Ficus benghalensis, has flowers enclosed inside a fleshy structure called a syconium, so they are not visible externally. The fruit is a small fig (mature syconium) that turns reddish-brown to dark purple when ripe and is an important food source for birds and animals. Native range: Eastern and Southern Africa

Uses & Importance

Ecological: Ficus natalensis serves as a cornerstone of biodiversity in its native African landscapes. Like many members of the Ficus genus, it is a keystone species because it produces "stress-crop" figs— fruiting during periods when other forest trees are barren. This provides a critical survival diet for a wide array of wildlife, including fruit bats, monkeys, and numerous avian species like African Green Pigeons and Barbets. The tree is famously involved in a complex obligate mutualism with Agaonid wasps; these tiny insects are the only creatures capable of pollinating the flowers hidden inside the specialized syconium, while the tree provides a safe nursery for the wasp larvae. Its architectural growth habit, often starting as an epiphyte and developing into a large tree with a spreading canopy, offers vital nesting sites and microclimates for smaller organisms. Furthermore, its extensive and aggressive root system is exceptionally effective at stabilizing soils along steep riverbanks and slopes, preventing erosion and aiding in groundwater retention. In agroforestry, it is frequently used as a "live fence" or shade tree for coffee and banana plantations, protecting delicate crops from the intense tropical sun while improving the local nutrient cycle through its consistent leaf litter.

Medicinal: In traditional African medicine, particularly across East and Southern Africa, the Bark Cloth Fig is a multi-purpose therapeutic resource. The bark and leaves are most commonly prepared as decoctions or infusions to manage gastrointestinal disorders like chronic diarrhea and dysentery due to their high tannin content and astringent properties. It is also a staple in treating respiratory ailments, where steam inhalations of leaf extracts are used to clear congestion and soothe the throat. For dermatological care, the antimicrobial latex (milky sap) is applied directly to skin rashes, fungal infections, and wounds to accelerate the healing process and form a protective seal. Traditional

healers also utilize bark extracts as an eyewash to treat infections and inflammations. Modern phytochemical analysis has identified several bioactive compounds, including flavonoids and sterols, which exhibit anti-inflammatory and analgesic effects, supporting its traditional use in pain management. Beyond simple remedies, specific parts of the tree are used in postnatal care in various cultures to assist in recovery. The tree’s status as a "living pharmacy" is so established that in many rural communities, it is the first point of care for common infections, illustrating its deep integration into the indigenous healthcare systems of the region.

Cultural: The cultural significance of Ficus natalensis is most profoundly represented in Uganda, where the ancient art of making Bark Cloth (Lubugo) is recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The inner bark is harvested without killing the tree, then beaten with wooden mallets to create a soft, terracotta-colored fabric used for royal robes, burial shrouds, and ceremonial clothing. This sustainable practice embodies a deep spiritual connection between the people and the forest. In various African societies, the tree is regarded as a symbol of fertility, longevity, and ancestral presence; it is often planted at the sites of royal shrines or community gathering places to act as a witness to history. It is a "heritage tree" frequently associated with the founding of settlements and is protected by local taboos that forbid its felling. The tree's ability to regenerate even from large cuttings makes it a symbol of resilience and continuity. In spiritual rituals, the shade of the fig tree is considered a bridge between the physical and spirit worlds, where elders offer prayers for rain or peace. This profound respect ensures the tree's survival, as it is viewed not just as a plant, but as a silent guardian of the community’s social fabric and spiritual identity across generations.

Location

GPS: 20.15860192, 85.76535449

Directions: https://www.google.com/maps/dir/?api=1&travelmode=walking&destination=20.15860192%2C85.76535449