



Coconut

The Tree of Life

Coconut – the world’s most extensively cultivated nut boasts a prehistoric origin. New Zealand accounts for fossilized coconuts. Indians take for granted that the coconut originated in India because of references in ancient literature and its popularity in religious rituals. Malaysians stake their claim as the land of origin for the coconut. It may be difficult to ascertain the precise place but certainly it dominates the tropical coasts from Africa to South-east Asia. Some islands prospered just on account of the coconut and its trade. A few countries have even honoured it in their coat of arms.

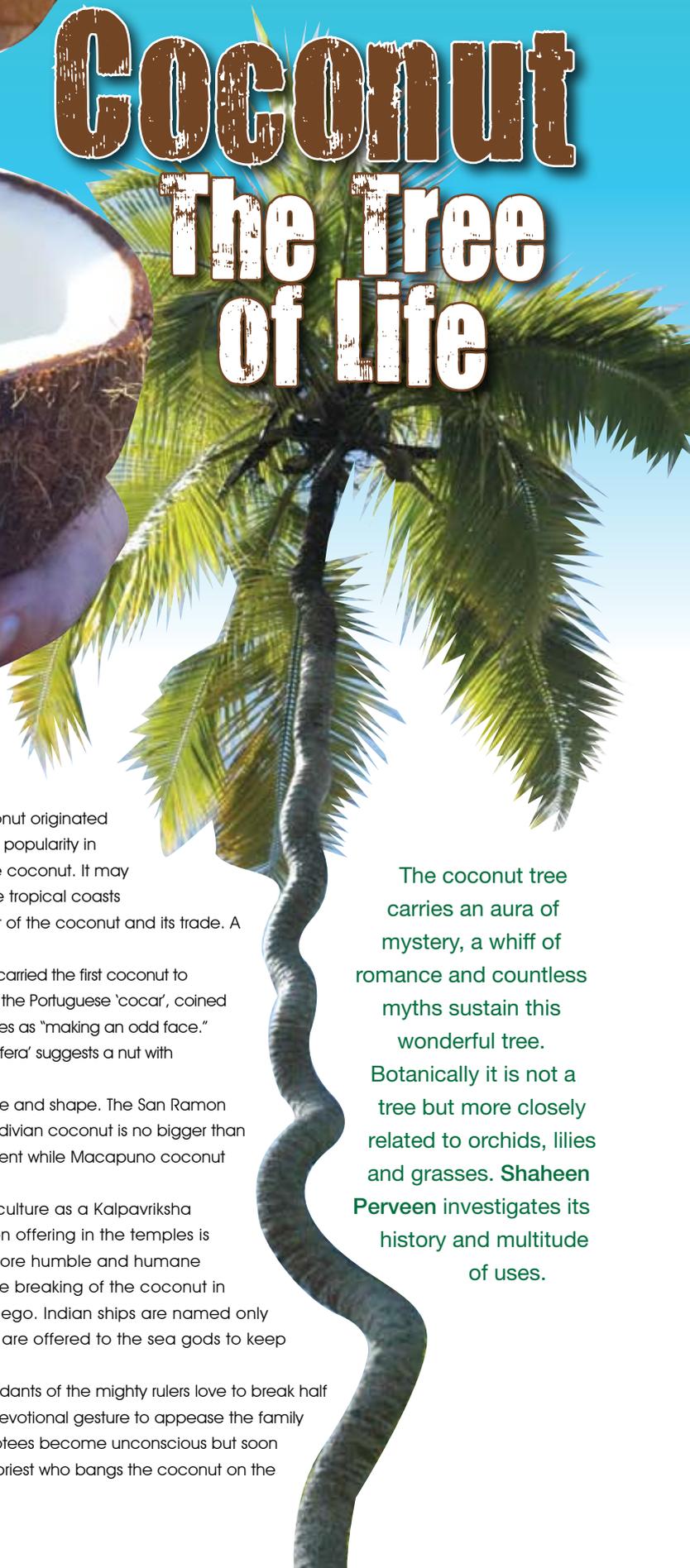
Portuguese explorers, while returning from India, are believed to have carried the first coconut to Europe. It was aptly called ‘Indian nut.’ The word ‘coconut’ originates from the Portuguese ‘cocar’, coined by the Portuguese seamen towards the end of the 15th century. It translates as “making an odd face.” In Spanish ‘coco’ refers to monkey face. The botanical name ‘Cocos nucifera’ suggests a nut with resemblance to face.

There are endless coconut varieties distinguished by their colour, size and shape. The San Ramon coconut from the Philippines bears the largest known nut while the Maldivian coconut is no bigger than an egg. The King coconut from Sri Lanka is noted for its rich sugar content while Macapuno coconut from Philippines is full of flesh as there is no cavity or water in it.

The coconut tree has been accorded a distinct place in Indian culture as a Kalpavriksha (tree of heaven) which symbolizes selfless service. The most common offering in the temples is the coconut which marks the transition from animal sacrifice to a more humble and humane practice of sacrificing a coconut that resembles a human head. The breaking of the coconut in festivals, rituals and celebrations symbolizes the breaking of human ego. Indian ships are named only after the coconut breaking ritual and during the monsoon and they are offered to the sea gods to keep the sea calm.

Certain warrior communities in South India who claim to be descendants of the mighty rulers love to break half a dozen coconuts on their heads within a matter of minutes. This is a devotional gesture to appease the family deity, Bireswara an aggressive form of Shiva. At times the ardent devotees become unconscious but soon they regain their senses and have reportedly never been injured. The priest who bangs the coconut on the

The coconut tree carries an aura of mystery, a whiff of romance and countless myths sustain this wonderful tree. Botanically it is not a tree but more closely related to orchids, lilies and grasses. Shaheen Perveen investigates its history and multitude of uses.



head makes sure that the coconut rips into two pieces. One can witness this ritual around Dussehra or Shivratri in any of the six Bireswara temples in Bangalore.

In Indian tradition, coconut trees are even married amidst rites and rituals. An ideal partner may be the tamarind tree! However, in Seychelles (precisely the Vallée de Mai), Coco de Mer trees are unique, with male and female trees and fruits. The fruits resemble distinct human anatomical details of respective human reproductive organs: the uncanny shape of the female pelvis and the phallic representation of the male. It is an amazing example of nature's bizarre world.

Local legends abound in interesting tales. One of them would have us believe that under the romance of a full moon, the female and male coconut trees move hand in hand to the sea shore. This leads the people to carry out the necessary rituals to ensure the perpetual existence of the Coco de Mer.

The word Coco is of Portuguese origin and dates back to the 1500s when Portuguese sailors used it to refer to the extraordinary face of the nut which attains full size after about five months and is fully mature after almost a year.

The nut, along with the plant, accounts for myriad uses. "If you could count the stars, then you could count all the ways the coconut tree serves us" suggests a Filipino saying.

The seemingly endless list of coconut products begins with mundane rope, basket, broom, net, hat, cushion, etc., made from coconut fibre. Craftsmen have successfully worked upon the coconut shell to create highly polished and carved cups, spoons and other utensils. Full coconuts with their husks have been sculpted into extraordinary statues. Nutritionists would recommend coconut oil, coconut water, coconut milk, cream and butter. Confectioners use desiccated coconut in candies and other confectionery.

Beauticians would vouch for the cosmetic uses of coconut oil and butter. Fresh coconuts are believed

to be great 'hair food' which can be crushed or grated and added to salads, rice or fruits. The sweet and fragrant coconut flesh, rich in dietary fibre, is neither warm nor cold.

Despite a high saturated fat content it is easily digestible and helps people



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suffering from digestive disorder. Young tender coconut water offers a variety of nutrients for the hair. Equally prized is the coconut oil which prevents drying of the scalp. For dandruff, mix one part of lemon juice and two parts of coconut oil. Massage it regularly into the hair roots. For hair loss consider an extract of coconut milk which thickens hair growth if used regularly. Powdered fenugreek with warm coconut oil makes an ideal hair tonic. It is applied on the hair to promote hair growth and prevent hair fallout. A popular south Indian custom is to insert fenugreek seeds in the eye of the coconut from which oil is extracted after a few days of roasting in the sun. This oil not only prevents hair loss but stimulates fresh growth.

Coconut oil is valued for its pleasing aroma and a good shelf life. It has a high percentage (92%) of saturated fatty acid which makes it resistant to rancidity. Coconut oil's is rich in lauric acid (heart protective fatty acid) which protects food from bacteria and fungus, so widely prevalent in tropical areas. Unlike other nuts and vegetable oils, it lacks in the rich package of nutrients, however. The oil is cholesterol free but still it raises cholesterol level in the blood and this earns it the risk tag for heart attack. For pain and problems in the gum, Ayurveda recommends a massage with coconut oils. Coconut oil is also preferred for the hydraulic brake fluids for aeroplanes, tooth pastes, insecticides and synthetic rubber.

The tender coconut water (technically liquid endosperm) is valued as a nutritious isotonic beverage, replete with sugars, minerals and traces of fat, protein, ascorbic acid and the bundle of minerals (potassium, sodium, calcium, phosphorus, iron and copper) and vitamin B.

According to Ayurveda, tender coconut water is "unctuous, sweet, increasing sperm, promoting digestion and clearing the urinary passage". The sugar concentration in nut water increases from 1.5% to 5.5% (glucose and fructose) in the early months of maturation and falls down to 2% (sucrose) at the stage of full maturity of the nut.

Coconut water is an ideal tonic for infants suffering from intestinal problems, malnutrition or intestinal worms. The presence of saline and albumen makes it a good drink in cholera cases. It is recommended as a diuretic and is also valued as a urinary antiseptic that checks urinary infections and eliminates mineral poisoning. The most miraculous use of coconut water is its use as glucose solution that can be injected intravenously in case of emergency. During the Pacific war the military doctors trusted coconut water as a humble substitute and injected it directly into the patient's veins. —