

Wonder nut in myths and tales

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Albert Einstein had no claims to be an agriculture scientist, leave alone an expert on Coconut. But a chance remark by Einstein has summed up the magic and mystery of this wonder nut.

He said, “Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted”. The 61 million tonnes of coconut in the world can certainly be counted and every bit of it, the water, the milk, the ‘flesh’, the fronds, the trunk, the husk, the fiber, the oil does count.

Coconut is important on other counts also. Take the coconut tree. Its leaves are plaited and used for thatching dwellings, its trunk is used for building houses and furniture making. There is no part of it that does not have a use for the people. May be that is why coconut is called “Kalpavruksha”.

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The myths and folklore of the countries which thrive on coconut are rich and varied. In Indian mythology, coconut is heaven-born. But the heaven for coconut was not created by the gods. Legend has it that the Sage Vishwamitra sent King Trishanku to heaven. This was resented by the King of gods, Devendra. Like Lucifer in Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’, Trishanku was hurled down from heaven by an irate Devendra. Before he reaches earth Vishwamitra creates another heaven, perhaps more resplendent than the heaven of gods. Vishwamitra also creates a versatile tree to provide food and succour to his ward, Trishanku. This wonder tree is the Coconut.

Shakespeare has said, “the poet, the lunatic and the lover are of imagination all compact”. When imagination becomes ‘esemplastic’ it gives to ‘airy nothings a local habitation and a name’. The riotous imagination of the anonymous poet has created a strange mythology around the Coconut. According to this myth, the coconut bore,

not nuts but children. Again the handy work of the irrepressible Vishwamitra. The gods got alarmed at the prospects of the earth getting peopled with millions and millions of coconut babies. Sensing the implications of the earth getting cowed down under the weight of endless children, Vishnu tried to appease the angry old sage. Finally good sense prevailed upon him and the earth was saved from the multitudinous army of coconut babies.

Once Siva and his consort Parvati happened to visit the Trishanku heaven. The tired Parvati took rest under a coconut tree which reverentially bowed before the goddess and offered her the refreshing elixir of the tender coconut water. Pleased with the benign gesture and the soothing effect of tender coconut, Parvathi blessed the coconut tree with the benediction that it will bear nuts with the enticing complexion of the goddess. The 'Gowri gatra' variety of coconut owes its bewitching beauty to the munificence of goddess Parvathi.

Shakespeare said, "the course of true love never did run smooth". This was true of the princess of Mindanao. She fell in love with a handsome young man who worked as gardner in the Palace. Bitten by love, he reveals to her his true identity. He was a prince. At the age of three he was orphaned because of the treacherous assassination of his dear father, the king. So the princess has chosen a prince as her paramour, though unknowingly. They decide to marry and remain as man and woman happily ever after. But love has its pains which the lovers have to endure. The General of the Army was jealous of the prince. He laid a trap and beheaded the prince. Reminiscent of Keats', "Pot of Basil", the princes carries the head of the slain prince and buries it. One morning a tiny plant grew out of the pot. It became a tree and reached upto the window where the princess was sitting at . A round fruit emerged from the tree almost the size of a man's head. This love-fruit is the coconut as we see it now.

In New Guinea, there is a legend that a coconut palm sprouted from the head of the first man who died. In the Phillipines also the coconut is treated as a tree of divine origin. The Trinity, according to them, consists of Bethela, Ulilang Kaluluva and Galang Kaluluva. They have not seen

each other and they do not know of existence of the other. Ulilang is a wanderer. His favourite destination is the earth. Once Bethela and Ulilang met each other. Ulilang did not like the fact that there is one more God in this universe. He challenges Bethela for dual. In the ensuing fight Bethela wins. Ulilang's body is cremated. After a while the other God, Galang, visited Bethela who extended all courtesies to him. Eventually Galang died. He was cremated near Ulilang. From the burial ground of the two Gods there sprouted a tree. This divine tree is the coconut. Its fruit has the shape of the head of Galang. Its leaves have the shape of the divine wings. Its trunk has the shape of Ulilang's body. Bethela built a palace using the trunk and leaves of the coconut tree. He created plants, animals and men. Men satisfied their hunger eating the fleshy part of coconut and quenched their thirst drinking its sweet water. With plaited coconut leaves they made their hats, brooms and mats. They made coir with its fiber.

Michael Flores Caasi, the poet of Phillipines has extolled the virtues of coconut in these beautiful lines.

How beautiful to stare and to see,
Those palm ribs of my favourite coconut tree;
Where trunk is towering up and high.
Like birds soaring high in sky.
The fruits may be hard outside
but there's a clear and soft heart inside.
The juice within can make me strong
And make my joyful life so long.
My tree is always proud to stand
Where roots are tightly holding grounds;
At night when stars and moon are bright,
My tree smiles in perfect sight.
O dear O lovely coconut tree
be still today, thanks for inspiring me.

In Indonesia, the islanders of Maluku believe in the myth of the coconut girl. A man named Ameta was hunting a wild boar . It ran for its dear life and was drowned in a lake. On its tusk there appeared a coconut. In a dream Ameta was told that he should plant it. He did so. In three days a palm sprouted from it. In another three days it flowered. Ameta climbed it to cut some flowers to make a

drink, but he cut his fingers. Blood started oozing out from the wound. A few drops fell on the flower. Nine days later a girl child was found on the flower. In three days she grew in to a marriageable girl. Ameta named her Hainuwele which means the coconut branch. She had the gift of producing valubale objects including jewels and precious stones in profusion. No doubt coconut produces invaluable gifts for the people in an unending manner.

Modern myths around the wonder nut are also inspiring and interesting. How many of us know that John F Kennedy owes his Presidentship to a coconut. When he was a Lieutenant in the American Navy he was incharge of a torpedo boat, P109. A Japanese destroyer cut his boat into two. Kennedy survived and escaped to Soloman Island. Kennedy took a coconut and wrote a message seeking help and gave it to the natives to be handed over to the American Navy men in Rendova. The natives promptly did so and Kennedy was rescued and later honoured and awarded the Navy and marine corps medal for bravery. When he became President of America, he traced out the coconut shell which saved his life and paved his way to the Whitehouse. This coconut shell is displayed at John F Kennedy library in Boston.

The sound of coconut shell, harsh and cacophonous, is certainly not an ear feast to the music lovers. But not so with the 5567 people who thronged the Trafalgar Square

for the St. George's day festivities. They were playing coconut shells. When thousands played the coconut shell, the cacophony turned into a symphony. The first largest coconut orchestra became a record maker enshrined in the Ginnes Book of Records.

Coconut certainly has potentials of export overseas. It also has potentials for export undersea. The importers are denizens of the sea world, the octopus. The veined octopus wears an armour made of coconut shell. It carries the armour wherever it goes. It also hides its soft body in coconut husk.

Three cheers to the marvels of the peerless nut. To extol its virtues in a spirited manner turn around and lavish oneself on its 'neera' or better still have a sip or two of the coconut pearl vodka. Manufactured by David Sheman Corporation of Missouri the coconut pearl vodka is not made of coconut but tastes like coconut. In a spirited revelry there should necessarily be the shaking of legs. Coconut offers scope for the rhythmic movement of the body and mind on the dancing floor. Or what is coco-de-roda for. Ask the Brazilian who will rave over this native dance form. Through nimble movements the dancers reproduce the subtle sounds of the cracking of the coconut shell in all its myriad hues and shades. No doubt the wonder nut inspires and intoxicates the Shakespearean trio 'the poet, the lunatic and the lover'.

