

The BEAT

PEOPLE FASHION

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FLORA

The Africa connection -

AS part of our nation's commemoration of Emancipation Day, celebrations will naturally focus on the human element. Africa's connection with our country is not, however, limited to this.

In fact, Trinidad and Tobago and the African continent are connected in many ecological ways as well. This week we look at elements of our nation's flora that share a surprising link to Africa.

If you had to choose one tree in Trinidad and Tobago that evokes fear and superstition it would be the silk cotton. This tree (*Cieba pentandra*) is found throughout both islands.

Outside of TT, the silk cotton is found throughout South America.

Also known as kapok, they can grow to enormous sizes – the TTFNC once estimated one Moruga specimen as having an astounding girth of 10.3m and a height of 56m!

The tree, of course, is feared for a supposed connection to the underworld and the substantial buttress roots only support the idea that the base of the tree is a special place for communing with spirits.

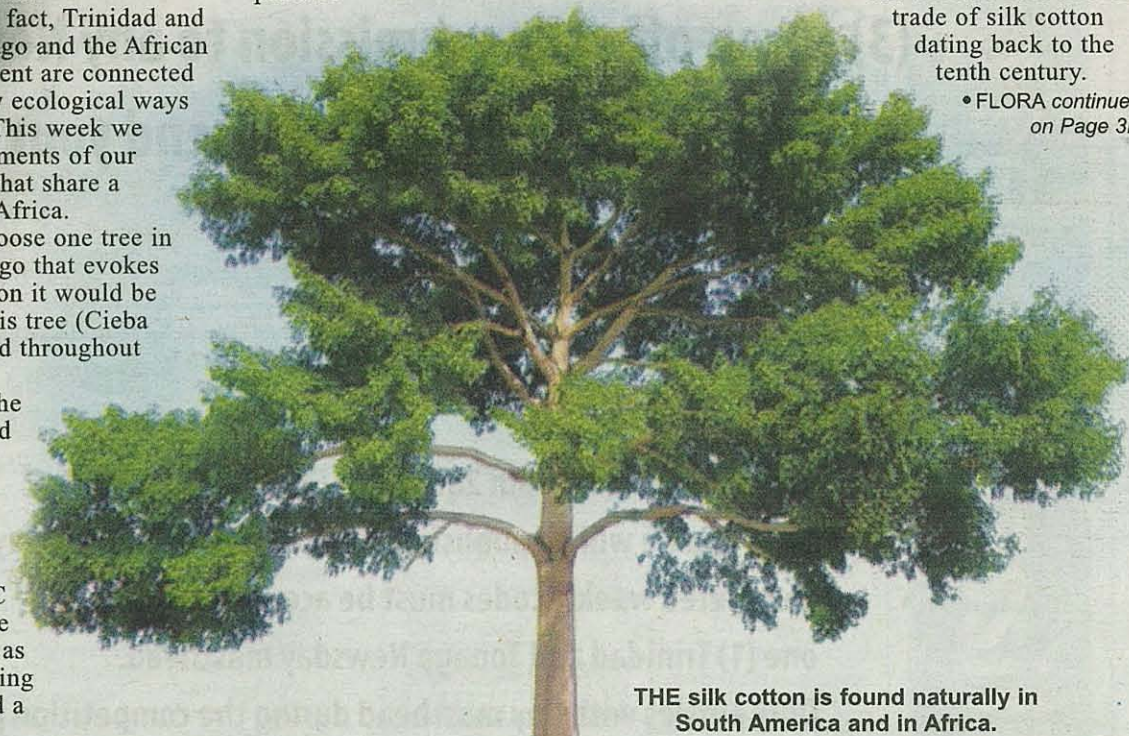
What is its connection to Africa? Surprisingly, the silk cotton is naturally found in certain parts of

Africa! Its presence here is something of a puzzle.

While the tree has been deliberately introduced by people to other parts of Africa, its presence in areas such as Cameroon, Ghana and Gabon is entirely natural.

Evidence of this includes 13,000 year old fossilised pollen in Ghana and historic accounts of trade of silk cotton dating back to the tenth century.

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THE silk cotton is found naturally in South America and in Africa.

THE pale-flowered polystachya grows on trees. It has small, green flowers.



Mysterious arrival of forest trees, orchids

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While the first thought that comes to mind is that these trees must be relicts from ancient times when the Gondwana landmass was intact, the results of at least one study of nucleotide divergence suggests that the African trees are actually descended from South America.

This implies that trees actually spread, presumably by wind or sea, to Africa from South America after the landmasses separated!

Besides its curious long-distance dispersion, the tree is also linked to Africa by the well-known tale of the African slave Gang Gang Sarah.

Alleged to have been a witch, she tried to fly back to Africa from atop a tall silk cotton tree (she did not make it on account of having consumed salt).

From the largest of forest trees, the Africa connection now turns to some of the smaller plants and the next time you take a walk in the woods, be sure to keep a careful eye out for these two.

The first grows very low to the ground.

There is no stem, just a swollen bulb, and its leaves are green with profuse pale markings. This is actually an orchid.

In fact, it is the African spotted orchid (*Oeceoclades maculata*).

Easier to recognise as an orchid when in bloom, it has distinctive pink patches on its lip.



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It grows all over the country from the coastline to highlands and is able to survive on very harsh terrain, sometimes barely attached to stones or leaf litter.

That said, it is more likely to be found in disturbed areas than mature old growth forests.

The other plant is also an orchid.

This one grows on the trunks and branches of trees throughout the island.

The pale-flowered polystachya (*Polystachya concreta*) is perhaps remarkable for its quite unremarkable flowers, being small and pale green.

As you might have guessed, these orchids also share a link with Africa.

This time, it appears that the direction of travel was the other way around with these species spreading from Africa to South America.

And spread they did. Both species are found throughout North, Central and South America.

The African spotted orchid is considered an invasive

weed in North America thanks to its adaptability, quick reproductive cycle and fast growth.

The exact means by which they arrived in the New World is a mystery worthy of investigation.

In the case of African spotted orchid, for instance, it has been suggested that the orchids' minute seeds were spread in the massive Sahara dust clouds that blow across the Atlantic.

Other theories posit that they were spread via the feathers of a bird, an object drifting in the sea, human traffic or perhaps a combination of several of these. However they arrived, both species are here to stay.

It is quite amazing to imagine seeds travelling so many thousands of kilometres across the sea and finding a home in a new land.

These examples are just a handful of our plant species that share a connection with Africa and hopefully, now that you know about a few of them, you will seek to learn even more and preserve this important part of our African connection.

Today's feature was written by Kris Sookdeo.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tffnc.org or visit our website at www.tffnc.org.

The Club's next monthly meeting will be held on 14 August 2014 at St Mary's College, POS.



THE African spotted orchid grows on the ground. It has a small attractive flower.