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FEATURES

The versatile sohari leaf

KRIS SOOKDEO

THE FESTIVAL of Diwali is characterised by several activities of religious significance – special prayers, fasting and the lighting of deyas to name a few.

The festival is also characterised by the delicious feast enjoyed with friends and family, traditionally served on a large leaf. So have you ever thought about your “roti leaf”?

What exactly is this thing you are about to eat off of? It is the leaf of the sohari (Calathea lutea). This relative of the ginger is widespread in areas that are well-watered – often along the banks of streams or abandoned agricultural plots and estates. Indeed, because of its usefulness, it is not uncommon for people to keep a clump handy in their backyards.

Sohari is a native species, found through much of South America. It is a vigorous plant and can easily spread to new areas by seed – characteristics which make it an invasive species in other countries where it is not naturally occurring (St Lucia for example).

Of course, while it is referred to as sohari in Trinidad, it carries a range of different names in other parts of its range including cachibou, pampano, prayer plant and Cuban/Havana cigar. Additionally, some local writers use the alternative spelling of “soharee”.

The leaves of the sohari are long and wide, typically measuring about 1.5ft wide and 3 ft in length. It is their size – along with their abundance, low cost, ease of harvesting, relative cleanliness and disposability – that



A sohari leaf with food.

makes the sohari a popular feeding surface at Diwali celebrations, Hindu weddings and other occasions. The flowers are relatively inconspicuous, being small and yellow and borne on brown flower bracts (which themselves might be mistaken for flowers).

As for the origin of the practice, a likely explanation is given in the following excerpt from www.trinigourmet.com:

“Soharee is a bhojpuri word that means ‘food for the gods’. Originally the word soharee was associated with a special kind of roti served to Brahmins at religious functions. The small rotis were basted in ghee and served on the large leaves found in Trinidad. Soon the leaves adopted the name of the rotis themselves. These days, the word soharee is most commonly associated with the large leaves used as plates at religious functions. Indian food needs space because of the variety of dishes served. This is why a large leaf such as the soharee is preferred to accommodate rice, kharee, curry mango, pumpkin, potato, channa, bhajee and salad.”

Of course, newcomers to the practice of eating on a sohari leaf should be cautioned. There is a classic Trinidadian joke about an Englishman who

attended a traditional East Indian wedding. When asked how he enjoyed the meal, he said that the curry was delicious but that the lettuce was rather hard.

But sohari is more than just a “roti leaf” and its usefulness in food preparation and presentation is well known throughout the neotropics.

The underside of a sohari leaf is covered by a thin waxy layer. This provides a degree of waterproofing which makes the leaves useful in the preparation of tamales in parts of South America. This tradition lives on in Trinidad to an extent, as sohari leaves are sometimes used in pastille production (although banana leaves are evidently preferred).

The leaves are also used to wrap a traditional Colombian guava jam called bocadillo de guayaba. The wax on the leaf’s surface has not gone unnoticed by industry, and there has been some research into the harvesting and procession of this resource for modern applications (including dentistry). Even without removing it from the plant, the waxy sohari leaves can be used in lining baskets and boxes. Furthermore, fibres stripped from the stems of sohari are dried and used in basket weaving and

handicraft. The plants themselves are considered ornamental thanks to their beautiful leaves and curious flower bracts and so find their way into the gardens of some international plant collectors.

At the time of writing, sohari plants were being offered for sale on the Internet at surprising prices – a package of 50 seeds or a single plant root (a rhizome) would set you back as much as TT\$65 (in the equivalent currency).

For the student of natural history, sohari has another interesting feature. If you have a clump of sohari nearby, go take a look at it now. Later this evening, take a look at it again. If you do, you may realise that the leaves have moved! The plant actually responds to changes in light levels; the leaves tend to point upwards and fold at midday, ostensibly to reduce excessive direct exposure to the sun.

So whether you sit down to eat on one later today or happen to pass one growing in the wilds, hopefully you will now know a little bit more about this fascinating plant. Hopefully, it will remain a part of our cultural and natural heritage for a long time to come.

For more info on our natural environment, contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists’ Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit www.ttfnc.org and our Facebook or YouTube pages. The club’s next monthly meeting will be held on November 12, at St Mary’s College, Port-of-Spain. Lecture: “The business of butterflies” by Imran Khan.