

Useful plants in Sudan <Part 3>

The Family of Malvaceae

There are many useful plants in the Malvaceae family which has many groups and is widely distributed throughout the world. The African continent and the Indian subcontinent host a lot of varieties of wild species and are assumed to be the homelands of the Malvaceae family. In Sudan, cotton, hibiscus, and okra are representative Malvaceae plants and occupy an important position in agriculture. Cultivation of Malvaceae in Egypt and Sudan has a long history and unique characteristics in terms of culture and usage. In this article I would like to touch on all three.

First of all, let us look at cotton. Cotton genome types are diploid in Asian cotton and tetraploid in Peruvian ('sea island') cotton. Globally, it is thought that there was a process in which long-staple Peruvian cotton, originating in the New World, was then gradually replaced as a premium variety by short-staple Asian cotton originating in the Indus River basin. Cultivars that have long been grown in Sudan were imported from India as "Asian cotton".

The industrial Revolution changed the face of the cotton industry which became developed as a mass production system. Throughout the British Indirect Rule Period, Sudanese cotton production was expanded making the region a prominent production area.

In response to the serious cotton shortage caused by the American Civil War in the mid 19th century, River Nile, Jazeera, and New Halfa were developed as major producing areas in the country. About 100 years have passed since modernization of industrial cotton agriculture occurred in these areas. There are currently around 20 cotton ginning factories operating in Sudan, and cotton is attracting renewed attention as a promising commercial crop for export.

My focus now shifts to hibiscus, a crop that yields flowers used for drinks. This is also considered to be a member of the Malvaceae family, which is native to Africa. Its not known precisely when hibiscus became popularly used for drinks in Sudan. It is called 'Karkade' and the product is usually sold on weighing scales at dry goods stores. While it is served chilled as a summer soft drink, it is also favoured as a hot

substitute for coffee or tea. Karkade is believed to have medicinal properties, and it is said that drinking it cold can lower blood pressure, while drinking it hot can raise blood pressure. Dried baobab flowers are the Sudanese traditional soft drink, but karkade is by far the most frequently consumed drink. Japanese people like the refreshingly sour taste of karkade, but Sudanese people add a lot of sugar, making it a sweet drink.

The third useful plant in the Malvaceae family is okra. The origin of this plant is unknown, and although it is generally believed that it might not be in Africa, it is true that many wild okra varieties grow naturally in Sudan. For this reason, when cultivating for seed production, it is recommended that okra be planted in sufficient isolation to avoid inadvertent hybridization with wild species, but natural hybridization appears to occur during regular cultivation. In cultivation under such conditions, it is difficult to fix and maintain varieties. Whether you like it or not, it is difficult to avoid crossbreeding with wild okra and hybridization with tougher wild varieties is expected to continue.

In terms of usage, Sudanese okra is rarely eaten raw. It is sliced into rounds, dried in the sun, and then powdered to make a thickening food. The processed food either in the form of round slices or powder is called 'Wayka', which distinguishes it from 'Bamiya' which is fresh/raw okra. So, why did this type of usage develop? It is assumed powdered okra is preferred over fresh in Sudan because hybridization with wild species has made Sudanese okra tougher and harder to eat.

It can be suggested that powdering was the optimal use of half wild partially cultivated okra.

We don't normally think of these very different crops coming from the same family but all three are widely utilized in Sudan which is why I have introduced them in this article.



Harvesting okra in Sudan