

On the Solomons' Sago Palm

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Throughout the British Solomon Islands there grows a fine sago palm (Fig. 1), cultivated everywhere for its leaves which are the universal thatch provider. Within living memory this palm was also grown for its sago and its fruits were gathered and sold to traders for export for button manufacture, under the name ivory nut, and the pidgin English name hebe nut, being a corruption of the trade name. The vernacular name in Kwara'ae and several other Solomons'

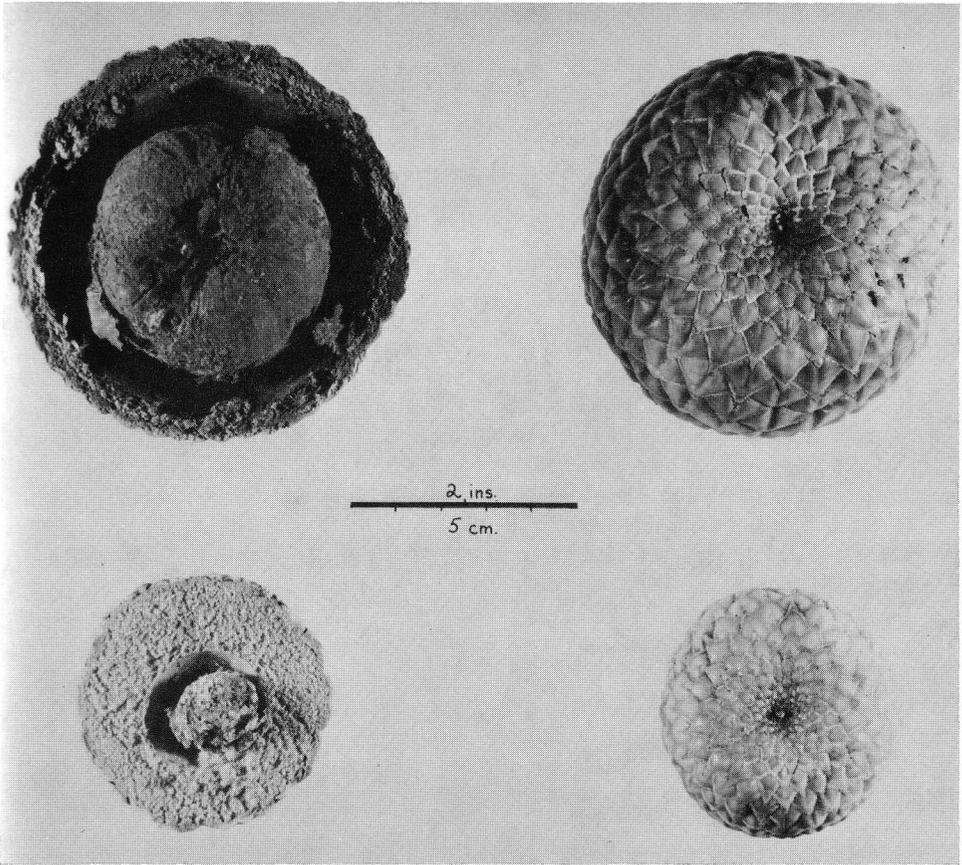
tongues is *sao*. This Solomons' sago palm is solitary; it does not sucker from the base. In this respect it differs from *Metroxylon sagu* Rottb., the widely cultivated sago of the East Indies. *Metroxylon sagu* is rare in the Solomons. It has a smaller stem, smaller inflorescence and fruits and also is restricted to swampy sites, whereas the Solomons' sago is often cultivated well away from water, sometimes on high ridges. *Metroxylon sagu* is locally recognised as *ambosao*.

Two species of *Metroxylon* have been described from the Solomon Islands,

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1. The Solomons' sago palm, a fine tree in the centre of Honiara, growing on the alluvial flood plain of the Matanika'o river. Most of the leaves have been removed for thatch.



2. Fruits from a Solomons' sago growing in Malaya: above, gathered in August 1971; below, gathered in February 1971.

Metroxylon salomonense and *M. bougainvillense*. These were fully annotated and illustrated by Beccari in his monumental monograph on the Asiatic lepidocaryoid palms, published in 1918 (*Annals of the Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta* 12(2): 1-231). Neither species had been much collected at the time Beccari wrote. In his key and descriptions he distinguished the two species and concluded by stating that *M. bougainvillense* is "very similar to *M. salomonense*, and perhaps only a variety of it from which, however, it differs in its smaller, more depressed fruit with the base excavate and the mesocarp

considerably thicker, and in having a smaller seed." His plate 114 very clearly shows these differences.

I have followed the flowering and fruiting of an individual Solomons' sago palm planted in Malaya and believe that *M. bougainvillense*, based as it is solely on one leaflet and fruit collected by Reching, merely represents *M. salomonense* with immature fruit.

There is a stand of Solomons' sago palms in Malaya at the Federal Agricultural Research Station at Serdang south of Kuala Lumpur, established from seed sent to Mr. H. D. Pagden there in about 1939. In 1955 seeds were taken

from this stand by Mr. E. Allen, an agricultural officer, to establish a grove by the Sungei Kanching at the northern end of Templer Park, a few miles north of Kuala Lumpur, at the time the Park was being set up. In December 1967, about twelve years later, one of these palms came into male flower, and Dr. J. Dransfield and I followed its development by frequent visits until we both left Malaya in September 1968. By April 1969, when I returned to Malaya from leave, the tree had just begun to set fruit, which were 3 cm. across by early July and continued to develop very slowly. On 11 February 1971, nearly two years later, I collected fallen fruits from below the tree. In mid August 1971 a second gathering was made. Fruits from these two gatherings are shown in Figure 2. In February 1971 (lower photos) the fruits were about 5 cm. across, many with excavate base (not shown), and with thick spongy mesocarp and small seed. By August 1971 (upper photos) the fruits were mostly larger, about 8 cm. across, with the base only slightly depressed, had a bigger seed, and the mesocarp was much thinner and was disintegrating into powder at its inner face. My Figure 2 is virtually identical with Beccari's plate 114 which shows fruits of *M. salomonense* (above) and *M. bougainvillense* (below). I do not think there can be any doubt that only one species is involved.

This huge palm has a very leisurely reproductive cycle. At the time of writing, December, 1971, four years after it came into flower, it still bears some fruits, though the leaves have now all turned brown.

The formal reduction of *M. bougainvillense* to synonymy is as follows:

Metroxylon salomonense (Warburg)

Beccari in Rechinger, Botanischer und Zoologischer Ergebnisse . . . , Denkschriften der K. Akad. d. Wissenschaft Math. Naturw. Klasse, Wien 89: 60, 61 f. 5b, e, f, i, 62 f, 7. 1913; Annals Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta, 12(2): 192-3, plate VI, f. 16, plate 114. 1918.

Coelococcus salomonensis Warburg, Ber. Deutch. Bot. Ges. 14: 141. 1896 Schumann & Lauterbach, Fl. Deutsch. Schutzg. Nachtr. 606. 1901.

Sagus sp. Guppy, The Solomon Islands 83, 90, 303. 1887.

Metroxylon bougainvillense Beccari in Rechinger, Denkschriften der K. Akad. d. Wissenschaft Math. Naturw. Klasse, Wien 89: 60, f. 5c, 61, f. 5g, h, j, 62. 1913; Annals Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta 12(2); 193-4; plate VI, f. 17, plate 114. 1918 **syn. nov.**

'Pacific Islands' *Metroxylon* in Whitmore, Palms of Malaya, 1973 (referring to the Serdang and Templer Park stands in Malaya).