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## Dypsis acaulis

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It is always exciting to find living individuals of a palm species known previously only from its type herbarium specimen. Often the herbarium specimen may be very incomplete and give little idea of what the living palm looks like and a certain amount of detective work is required to match up the living with the dead. However, in the case of *Dypsis acaulis* J. Dransf., from Madagascar, the type specimen consists of a whole plant, so when I first described it, it was easy enough for me to imagine how the palm would appear in nature.

*Dypsis acaulis* is based on a collection made by Perrier de la Bâthie in 1912 at Marambo near Antalaha on the Masoala Peninsula, north-east Madagascar. I found the collection in the herbarium in Paris among the bundles of unnamed material in 1984. It seemed to be a very distinctive palm with an apparently creeping stem and entire bifid leaves about 30 cm long that are white on the undersurface. The inflorescence is spicate, with a dense spiral of overlapping bracts in the flower-bearing region, the whole thus appearing rather like the spicate inflorescence of a species of *Geonoma*. I was able to dissect open the very young flower buds and these showed that there are only three stamens. The material suggested a distinctive species of *Dypsis*, unlike any other described. In particular, the white undersurface of the leaves is unique in the genus, and a rare feature in other genera in Madagascar. It seemed most remarkable that this apparently very distinctive species should not have been described and named for the Flore de Madagascar (Jumelle & Perrier de la Bâthie, 1945), despite the material being more complete than that of many other species they described.

On my first trip to Masoala in 1986 and on sub-

sequent trips I kept a keen eye out for this distinctive palm but saw no trace of it. By the time the manuscript of *Palms of Madagascar* was ready to go to the printer, we still had no further material of the palm, but, as it appeared to be so distinctive, I decided to describe and name it in any case.

In November 1996 I was back in Madagascar and had the chance to visit the Masoala Peninsula once again, but this time from the east rather than the west where all my previous trips have taken place. Within a few minutes of entering the forest on our first day, on the walk to our base camp I found a palm instantly recognizable as *Dypsis acaulis*, appearing just as I had imagined. It is one of the smallest species of the genus and altogether rather decorative. Photographs show the distinctive dark green bifid leaves that are white on the undersurface, the acaulescent habit, and the spicate inflorescence with the glistening cherry-red fruit. The photographs do not show the tiny male flowers with their three minute stamens.

*Dypsis acaulis* seems to be a rare palm in Masoala. Its distribution in the area I visited in 1996 is very patchy; it occurs in two valleys and associated lower slopes but is absent from a wide area of apparently suitable habitat that we walked through. It seems to be most abundant in valley bottoms on stream banks and lower hill slopes where it forms rather close colonies up to about 50 cm across.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the management and staff of Projet Masoala in Antalaha for arranging my visit to Masoala and making it so rewarding and enjoyable.



1. *Dypsis acaulis* growing beside a stream; the brilliant white undersurface of the leaves can be seen. 2. *Dypsis acaulis*: the short spike is about 10 cm long and bears brilliant red ripe fruit.

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