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THE ANTIQUITY OF THE COCONUT PALM IN WESTERN BORNEO

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From his archaeological excavations and other observations at Kota Batu, Brunei and also in Sarawak, Dato Seri Laila Jasa Tom Harrison was convinced that before about 1835 there were no coconuts further down the west coast into Sarawak—at least in living traditional historic terms (Harrison, 1958; 1974). A Sarawak legend recorded by Marican Salleh (1958) suggested that coconuts were introduced after Sir James Brooke brought stable coastal conditions. Coming from the Natuna Islands via the Turtle Islands, coconuts were taken to the mainland around Sematan from where they spread to Santubong and inland up river valleys. It was Harrison's opinion that this race of coconuts does badly away from the sea and he thought that mistakes have been made in trying it on peaty and inland soils.

By contrast, Harrison found that Brunei Bay has a different, more ancient, tradition of cultivated coconut palms, seemingly coming down from the Sulu Sea in harder form. He speculated that the present common coconut in Brunei, the kelapa, may have largely replaced earlier, poorer forms but also itself have suffered some decline in recent centuries, possibly because of disease. Harrison considered that Brunei had coconuts when Sarawak did not and that in earlier times they must have been important in the local economy. He was surprised that the multiple uses of the coconut palm in all its parts had not played a major role in the later economy further down the coast from Brunei Bay - an area which, in his words, was by no means overprovided with good or easy sorts of food. The absence of coconuts along the whole Niah-Bintulu stretch, he suggested, may be partly responsible for the extraordinary low level of coastal population until very recently.

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by

H.C. Harries

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Introduction

From his archaeological excavations and other observations at Kota Batu, Brunei and also in Sarawak, Dato Seri Laila Jasa Tom Harrisson was convinced that before about 1835 there were no coconuts further down the west coast into Sarawak – at least in living traditional historic terms (Harrisson, 1958; 1974). A Sarawak legend recorded by Marican Salleh (1958) suggested that coconuts were introduced after Sir James Brooke brought stable coastal conditions. Coming from the Natuna Islands via the Turtle Islands, coconuts were taken to the mainland around Sematan from where they spread to Santubong and inland up river valleys. It was Harrisson's opinion that this race of coconuts does badly away from the sea and he thought that mistakes have been made in trying it on peaty and inland soils.

By contrast, Harrisson found that Brunei Bay has a different, more ancient, tradition of cultivated coconut palms, seemingly coming down from the Sulu Sea in hardier form. He speculated that the present common coconut in Brunei, the *kelapa*, may have largely replaced earlier, poorer forms but also itself have suffered some decline in recent centuries, possibly because of disease. Harrisson considered that Brunei had coconuts when Sarawak did not and that in earlier times they must have been important in the local economy. He was surprised that the multiple uses of the coconut palm in all its parts had not played a major role in the later economy further down the coast from Brunei Bay - an area which, in his words, was by no means overprovided with good or easy sorts of food. The absence of coconuts along the whole Niah-Bintulu stretch, he suggested, may be partly responsible for the extraordinary low level of coastal population until very recently.

Harrisson came to the conclusion that there are two lines of ingress for coconuts into west Borneo – an early one from the northeast and another quite recently from the southwest. He felt this would have genetical, botanical and hence cultivational effects of relevance to modern Malay cash crop economics. In an attempt to confirm whether two stocks of palms are involved he appealed to readers of the Sarawak Museum Journal to send from every local source in Borneo (including European) information, tradition, legend and myth on the origin and evolution of the coconut in the area concerned. According to the Museum's Curator there has been no further information added to the subject (Lucas Chin, personal communication).

Coconut botany

The brief descriptions of the three principal kinds of coconuts found along the Brunei river (Harrisson, 1974) can be related to basic coconut types classified in a system that contrasts the results of natural selection with those of domestication (Harries, 1978). It is possible to show that the two stocks