

Coconut Palm, The

At low altitudes throughout the tropical and sub-tropical world, the coconut palm rules supreme. Some tiny spits of sand on part of a coral lagoon are barely large enough to hold three coconut palms, and that is what you will see; three trees; the center one growing straight up, the other two both leaning away in order for the leaves to have adequate room to unfurl.

There is scarcely a need of the Pacific Islander that is not supplied by the coconut palms. Their wood makes spars, furnishes rafters for houses, the foot and headboards of beds, rollers for the big canoes or whale-boats, fences against wild pigs, and fuel. The leaves make screens and roofs of dwellings, baskets, and coverings. When the tree is young, the network that holds the leaves is a beautiful silver, as fine as India paper and glossy; narrow strips of it are used as hair ornaments and contrast nicely with the shiny black locks of the girls. When older, this matting has every appearance of coarse cotton cloth, and is used to wrap food, or is made into bags and even rough garments, especially for fishermen.

The white flowers are small and grow along a branching stalk, protected by a sheath, and just above the commencement of the leaf. From them is made the coconut-brandy or "toddy" that enables the native to forget his sorrows. I have had a taste of this; we were visiting the island of Ngatik, and two of our crew became separated from the rest. This presented no problem, as the island was only a few hundred yards long and about half that in width. There was a large caldron containing perhaps three gallons of a discolored liquid with an assortment of floating insects and pieces of bark covering the surface. Several young men were hanging around, helping themselves with cups of this concoction, and they offered us some. Now it is sometimes considered impolite to refuse offered food or drink by the native people, and in the interest in international relations, we pushed back the floating unknowns and scooped up a small amount of the elixir with a cup made of one half of a coconut shell. It was quite strong, but not as bad tasting as we had anticipated; however, don't expect to find it on the menu of your favorite bar any time soon.

Flowers and nuts in every stage of development are on the same tree, a year elapsing between the first blossom and the ripe nut. Long before it is ripe, but after full size has been attained, the nut contains a pint or even a quart of delicious juice, called milk, water, or wine, in different languages. It is clear as spring water, of a delicate acidity, yet sweet, and no idea of its taste can be formed from the half-rancid fluid in the ripe nuts sold in Europe or America. It must be drunk soon after being taken from the tree to know its full delights, and must have been gathered at the stage of growth called *koie*, when there is no pulp within the shell.

Not long after this time the pulp, white as snow, of the consistency and appearance of the white of a soft-boiled egg, forms in a thin layer about the walls of the nut. This is a delicious food, and from it are made many dishes, puddings and cakes. It is no more like the shredded coconut of commerce than the peach plucked from the tree is like the canned fruit.

If left on the tree, the nut will in time fall, and in due course there begins in it a marvelous process of germination. A sweet, whitish sponge forms in the interior, starting from the inner end of the seed enclosed in the kernel, opposite one of the three eyes in the smaller end of the

nut. This sponge drinks up all the liquid, and, filling the inside, melts the hard meat, absorbs it, and turns it into a cellular substance, while a white bud, hard and powerful, pushes its way through one of the eyes of the shell, bores through several inches of husk, and reaches the air and light.

This bud now unfolds green leaves, and at the same period two other buds, beginning at the same point, find their way to the two other eyes and pierce them, turning down instead of up, and forcing their way through the former husk outside the shell, enter the ground. Though no knife could cut the shell, the life within bursts it open, and the husk and shell decay and fertilize the soil beside the new roots. Which, within five or six years, have raised a tree eight or nine feet high, itself bearing nuts to reproduce their kind again.

These palms can produce nuts when only this high, but they continue to grow for many years until they become quite tall. Sometimes one of these older trees, if they are growing right on the edge of the beach, will succumb to the tides or a storm, and fall into the ocean, where they might remain for some time. As the daily rhythm of the tide alternately cover part of the trunk and then uncover it, the fibers in the trunk will become separated from the rest of the bark as it slowly decays. This is when the women will carefully remove these fibers, some of which can be several feet long, and from them make a two-ply twist of rope that is very strong and long-lasting. I watched an islander repairing an outrigger canoe once. This fellow was no doubt a really nice guy; he didn't mind me watch him as he made his repairs, but his countenance would have made your heart jump up in your throat if you had met him face to face while rounding a corner at twilight!

He had but one tool – a Collins Company machete, made in Collinsville, Connecticut. That company must have had some super salesmen years ago, as their products were (and still are) to be found in the most out of the way places on the face of the world. When he felt that the outrigger had been firmly reattached to the dugout, there was about a foot of rope left over. I was watching him while bent over, with my hands on my knees, and suddenly the machete was raised up and brought down with a “swish”, cutting off the extra rope, but in so doing coming close to my left ear. It really wasn't close, but at that moment, I wouldn't have been surprised to have seen my ear lying in the sand! In almost the same motion, his hand holding the rope came up near my face; he was offering it to me as a keepsake! I'm glad that he never knew how his countenance and actions rattled me. It was one of several episodes in my life that proved that looks are truly skin deep.

Historic Bytes

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