

The Use of *Pigafetta elata* for Making Furniture in Indonesia

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Pigafetta elata is a majestic palm endemic to the island of Sulawesi, Indonesia (Dransfield 1998). Its distinctive characteristics include lines of shiny golden-brown spines along the base of its leaves, and a dark-green trunk with light grey rings where the leaves have fallen off (Whitten 1987). According to Uhl and Dransfield (1987), this pioneer palm occurs at an elevation between 300 and 1500 m above sea level on river banks, landslips, very steep-sided ridgetops and disturbed forest. Given its habitat preferences, *Pigafetta* plays an important role in the forest ecosystem by decreasing rates of soil erosion and even landslides (pers. obs.).

In North Sulawesi, the most beneficial feature of *Pigafetta* is its stem. The strong mature trunks of *Pigafetta* have proved to provide long-lasting timber. The trunk of *Pigafetta* is commonly used in the development of bridges and water conduits in paddy fields. Historically, it has also been used for over decades as a construction material for traditional houses, especially for interior walls and floors. Prior to the development of wooden house industry, many traditional houses in Minahasa, North Sulawesi, were made from the trunk of this palm. Currently, *Pigafetta* is found only in older houses, where it is used in the construction of interior walls and floors. In certain rural areas, the stem of *Pigafetta* is also used by villagers to build huts in the forest. Interestingly, these huts are also used in processing brown jaggery or palm sugar

(*gula aren*) and local mild wine (*saguer*) made from the sugar palm, *Arenga pinnata*.

Recently *Pigafetta* has become economically important for local people in the Nooangan area of North Sulawesi as an important component in the small-scale home furniture industry. According to local people, the timber's overall quality is much better than that of the coconut, which is also commercially used for furniture making in North Sulawesi. *Pigafetta* offers an excellent alternative to coconut in regards to furniture-making. This is due to its great abundance and ease of harvest, as opposed to the coconut tree which is grown mainly for coconut harvest.

When harvested, the mature stem, which is large in diameter (the bigger the better), is cut into



1. Trunks of *Pigafetta elata*, hollowed out, dried and ready for the furniture-maker



2. A finished set of furniture, made from *Pigafetta elata* trunks.

sections or manageable lengths. A half-portion of a *Pigafetta* palm is used to make a set of furniture, commonly comprising one small table and five chairs. The pithy core of the trunk, which is soft, is scooped out. Then the tube-shaped pieces of trunk are left to dry in the sun for at least a month (Fig. 1). It takes about one to two weeks to produce a set of furniture. The price depends on the furniture items. For example, the price of a set of furniture (Fig. 2), consisting of one small table and five chairs, ranges from US\$75 to \$100, which is quite expensive by Indonesian standards.

According to local craftsmen, *Pigafetta* is harvested in secondary forest, owned by local people. Since this is a new furniture making industry in North Sulawesi, few palms appear to have been cut down by the craftsmen from the forest so far. Indeed, *Pigafetta* is still abundant in this particular area. Local people said further that if the demand for the furniture increases, they will begin to cultivate the palm commercially (it takes about ten years for a palm to reach harvestable size). The marketing of this small-scale home industry is carried out by the craftsmen themselves through promoting the product on a door-to-door basis. Based on personal observations and interviews with local craftsmen, it is apparent that most of the furniture was only sold to the villagers in surrounding areas. One obstacle faced by this small-scale industry is that of obtaining financial resources required to run the business. Currently, craftsmen make only the furniture that has been ordered since they lack the money to make excess products. This is also

why they find it difficult to promote the products in other regions. Even though this is not a very intensive labour industry, it makes a significant contribution to the local economy.

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ERRATA

On page 175 of PALMS 44(4), the legend to Figure 1 reads "Map of the islands on which *Siphokentia* is known to occur." *Siphokentia* is, in fact, not known from Yapen or Num, nor does it occur on mainland New Guinea as was implied unintentionally by the legend. The presence of *Siphokentia dransfieldii* on Supiori and Numfoor was reported to one of the authors by Biak islanders and has not been verified, although there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of their information. – W. J. Baker

In the review of D.R. Hodel (ed.) *Palms and Cycads of Thailand*, in PALMS 44(3): 99, John Dransfield mentioned that J.F. Maxwell had recently collected *Calamus harmandii* in Thailand, and, if the specimen proved to be correctly identified, this would represent a new record, not in Hodel's book. The specimen has recently been received at Kew and is not *C. harmandii* but *C. erectus*, itself a new record for Thailand.
– J. Dransfield