

Coconut, the Tree of Life in Malaysia

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Guess Malaysians all know how does a coconut (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coconut>) look like. If we were to picture it, an image of a slight oval greenish (or sometimes yellowish) nut will appear in seconds. Oh wait, is coconut literally a nut? Or a fruit? Or, it's just a huge seed of a tree?

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Is coconut a nut?

No, it isn't.

Botanically, it is a drupe (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drupe>) (aka stone fruit), which is also the seed for reproduction of the coconut palm (scientifically termed as *Cocos nucifera*). It can be found almost along every single coast of Malaysia's beach and sometimes even inland, which explains why coconut is widely used or consumed in Malaysians' daily life.

Although coconut is everywhere, it doesn't take its geological advantage to become the main economical crop that contributes to our national development, in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (<http://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/gdp.asp>), export earnings, as well as livelihood income and employment. Why is this happening so?

Let's take a look back on the historical story of Malaysia's coconut.

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A brief coconut history.

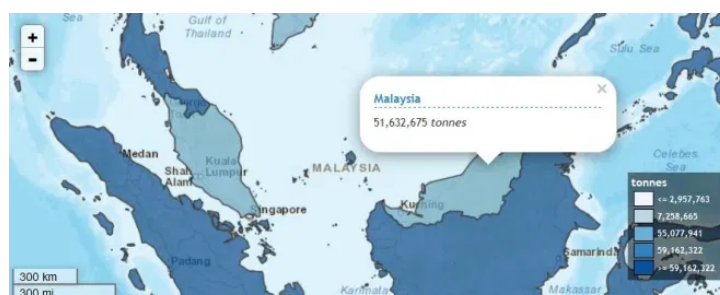
Around 9,000 years ago, coconut was suspected to be found by humans (<https://publications.csiro.au/rpr/pub?list=BRO&pid=procite:ee5f14de-41db-45f0-80b3-f4243886f61d>) at some place on earth. No evidence shows what is the exact country of origin but Malaysia's larger islands and continental coast are indicated to be the regions where coconut was domesticated.

Dating back to the mid-19th century, where a rough data of Malaysia's coconut production amount (<http://faostat.fao.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=339&lang=en&country=131>) was first recorded (on year 1961), coconut palms were being planted by private sectors and small landholders. It acted as a source of food to these households, while remaining ones would then be traded for other daily necessities. The total area of coconut plantations by that time were, however, not stated in any official documents.

During year 1961, the total amount of production of this agricultural commodity hits top one (<http://faostat.fao.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=339&lang=en&country=131>) among all crops, with the value of 1,344,819 tonnes. However, it did not bring the most income to Malaysia. The reason behind was because almost 70% of the total production was consumed domestically.



Coconut harvesting by a native orang asli family during the 1960s. (Image source from [My Far East, Malaysia](http://www.myfareast.org/Malaysia/photos.html) (<http://www.myfareast.org/Malaysia/photos.html>))



In year 1984, it is officially stated that the total agricultural land use of coconut plantations in Malaysia were 266,202 hectares. The acreage then hit the highest point in the following year with an amount of 334,100 hectares. In 1995, a declination (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/x6906e/x6906e08.htm>) was recorded to roughly 250,000 hectares. Nevertheless, Malaysia was still a net exporter of coconut products, with a total export value of RM165.2 million (<http://www.fao.org/3/a-x6906e/x6906e08.htm#CROP%20DIVERSIFICATION%20IN%20MALAYSIA%20Tunku%20Mahmud%20Bin%20Tunku%20Yahya>) (US\$43 million).

Moving on to the early 20th century, the oil crop industry started to flourish in Malaysia. The increased competition from other oils (eg. palm oil, soy bean oil) has caused coconut plantations to be less focused. In year 2012, coconut production quantity significantly dropped to 606,530 tonnes (from top five (<http://faostat.fao.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=339&lang=en&country=131>) among Malaysia's agriculture commodities in year 1985 to top eight (<http://faostat.fao.org/site/567/default.aspx#ancor>) in year 2012).

In year 2014, Malaysia is no longer a coconut exporter. Supply and Utilization Accounts (SUA) of Selected Agricultural Commodities, Malaysia has shown statistics that the self-sufficiency ratio (SSR) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-sufficiency>) of coconuts was no more 100% (96.7% (https://www.statistics.gov.my/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=164&bul_id=ZzNBdUIWT2I4NE4xNCt6U2VNc1Q2QT09&menu_id=Z0VTZGU1UHBUT1VJMFpXRRR0xpdz09)) while the import dependency ratio (IDR) (<http://philfsis.psa.gov.ph/index.php/id/16/meta/IDR>) raised up to 11% (https://www.statistics.gov.my/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=164&bul_id=ZzNBdUIWT2I4NE4xNCt6U2VNc1Q2QT09&menu_id=Z0VTZGU1UHBUT1VJMFpXRRR0xpdz09). As coconut crop is still being cultivated by smallholdings without using recommended varieties, a declination in yield and farm productivity is now observed in Malaysia, while in the meantime, demands for coconuts are rising in the market.

"This is why we are encouraging coconut planting. We need to educate the farmers so that they do not change to other crops but instead increase production," said Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob, Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Minister.

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A coconut isn't just a coconut.





Image source from www.belfastvibe.com

Coconut has never been just a coconut.

From the tree trunk, to the leaves and even to the innermost of the fruit, every single part of a coconut palm can be fully utilized. This is why coconut tree is being called the "Tree of Life" (<https://tsfitnessnyc.wordpress.com/nutrition/food%C2%A0and%C2%A0diet/fruits/the-tree-of-life-coconut-palm/>) worldwide. It can grow literally anywhere, anytime and under any conditions, regardless of high salt inflow, soil nutrients depletion or low annual

precipitation.

Throughout the coconut history, it has provided a wide source of food, fuel, shelter, and even serves medicinal value and decoration purpose for humans. Besides the natural coconut water which is named as the “world’s safest natural soft drink” (<https://tsfitnessnyc.wordpress.com/nutrition/food%C2%A0and%C2%A0diet/fruits/the-tree-of-life-coconut-palm/>). and “fluid of life” (<http://www.naturalhealth365.com/coconut-water.html/>), coconut sugar, milk, oil, soaps, mats, brooms (known as *penyapu lidi* in Malay language) and even cosmetic products can be derived from a coconut palm after processing.

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We’re nut about coconuts!

In Malaysia, practically everyone recognizes a coconut. We drink it during hot weather, use it to cook famous local food (eg. *nasi lemak* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasi_lemak)), make various tasty and nutritious *kuih* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuih>) (eg. *dadar gulung* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dadar_gulung), *clorot* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clorot>), *klepon* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klepon>) etc.) and to add on, even earn a living from it.



(<https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/2016/04/05/coconut-the-tree-of-life-in-malaysia/sswf-nasilemak2/>)



(<https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/2016/04/05/coconut-the-tree-of-life-in-malaysia/resep-klepon->

pandan-isi-gula-merah/)



(<https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/2016/04/05/coconut-the-tree-of-life-in-malaysia/clorot-besar->

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(<https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/2016/04/05/coconut-the-tree-of-life-in-malaysia/resep-praktis-dadar->

gulung-isi-kelapa-gula-merah/)

Along the streets in every state of Malaysia, business related to coconuts can be seen everywhere. The most common selling products are food and beverage.

*Photos below are all taken by *author*.

In Johor,

There is an old shop standing in the heart of Johor Bahru city area, sells Toddy (aka tuak, air nira, கள்ள or coconut wine). It was opened in year 1983 by an Indian family and is now being passed down to the fourth generation.



"I'm born in Malaysia and is currently living in Singapore. I will travel back here once in a week, just to drink this RM3 wine. Every single time, i will order more than a mug. It's so cheap! Plus, you can't find this taste anywhere else," said Mr. Jayesh Rajagh, a loyal customer for 18 years.



In Melaka,

A well-known tourism spot named *Klebang Original Coconut Shake*, serves ice-blended coconut water topped with vanilla ice cream. With the high rating (four out of five stars (https://www.tripadvisor.com.my/Restaurant_Review-g2441111-d4340880-Reviews-Klebang_Coconut_Shake-Klebang_Kechil_Melaka_State.html)) in TripAdvisor, tourists and locals are willing to queue up for hours just to have a sip of this dessert during the hot sunny afternoon.

"Our shop sells at least 100 cups per day. During holiday period, the sales will even increase in double," said Mr. Shahzam Mohd Zariff, one of the workers.



(<https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/28/>)



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(<https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/30/>)



(https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/2016/04/05/coconut-the-tree-of-life-in-malaysia/6150750598_8cf4a16868_b/)



(https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/2016/04/05/coconut-the-tree-of-life-in-malaysia/mtxx_20160413_090036/)

malaysia/mtxx_20160413_090036/)

In Selangor,

5km away from the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC), a little wooden shack was built by a young couple, selling coconut milkshake at the roadside in Broga Village. On 1st January 2016, their entrepreneurial story was being published in China Press (<http://www.chinapress.com.my/20160101/%E7%9F%A5%E9%A3%9F%E5%BA%AB%E7%BC%8E%E7%94%B7%E6%9C%8B%E5%8F%8B%E6%A4%B0%>)

"We started this small business in year 2014. We are really grateful for all the customers who have been supporting us during the past two years, especially students from UNMC," said Mr. Teh Kae Hou, owner of the shop.



(https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/2016/04/05/coconut-the-tree-of-life-in-malaysia/mtxx_20160413_094712/)

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(https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/2016/04/05/coconut-the-tree-of-life-in-malaysia/mtxx_20160413_094856/)

In Kuala Lumpur,

A creamery brand that sells coconut ice cream, *Sangkaya* (<http://www.sangkaya.co/>) was founded by a group of Malaysians during early June, 2014. It all started from a small stall selling ice cream at Jalan Alor Bukit Bintang to a business which currently has 36 brand outlets all over Peninsular Malaysia. This has marked a reputable milestone in the artisanal ice cream industry.



(<https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/20/>)



(<https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/22/>)



(<https://jocelynechin.wordpress.com/18/>)

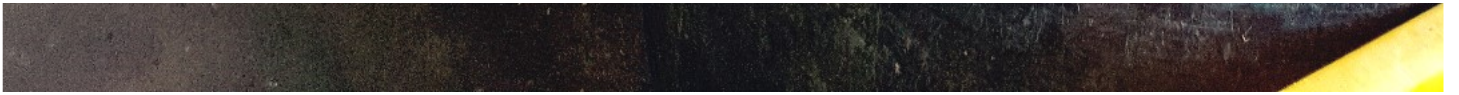
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Coconut, a resource of importance to Malaysia. It might not have brought a huge economical growth to the country, but definitely, a significant impact in every Malaysian's daily life.

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Below are some random photos taken during coconut-sightseeing in Malaysia.





The coconut shredding machine

The art of coconut shaving in Malaysia



(Video was originally filmed by *author*)

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And of course, songs can be made from coconut too! Enjoy listening!

The Coconut Song - (Da Coconut Nut)



— “Da Coconut Nut” by *Smokey Mountain*

Mohombi - Coconut Tree ft. Nicole Scherzinger



— “Coconut Tree” by *Mohombi ft. Nicole Scherzinger*

(Both videos source from [Youtube \(https://www.youtube.com/\)](https://www.youtube.com/))

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