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Sago: A Storied Species of West Papua

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Summary:

In the rural West Papuan district of Merauke, large-scale oil palm development is subverting the relations of Indigenous peoples to sago palms and their diverse ecosystems. Drawing from long-term fieldwork among Marind communities, this essay explores the ecological, cultural, and experiential implications of monocrop expansion for the more-than-human relations animating Merauke's forest lifeworlds.

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SAGO: A STORIED SPECIES OF WEST PAPUA

Oil palm killed the sago
Oil palm killed our kin
Oil palm choked our rivers
Oil palm bled our land

Sago, sago
You were brought to life in a place called Timasoe
Timasoe, Timasoe, Timasoe
There, Marind grew strong and bold
There, our children became fearless warriors
Our wives had shiny skin and abundant sweat
Our men were tall and fit

From eating sago, we grew bone
From eating sago, we knew home
Companions of the swamp, the forest together we would roam

Timasoe, Timasoe, Timasoe
A sacred place, a peaceful place
Where wild deer and pigs and birds came
For water and shade and protection from the rain

Timasoe, Timasoe, Timasoe
Dare I visit you now?
With sorrow and shame and anger I tread your soil
Timasoe, birthplace of the sago palm
You are now a bare and barren place
Sago, sago, sago
Between roads and dust, you stand
Hostage oil palm, the hungry palm, you weep

Valuable like agarwood, sago is not
Expensive like red meranti, sago is not
Elegant like the frangipani, sago is not
Majestic like the banyan, sago is not

Yet life it brings and growth to share
Food it gives and water it cleanses
Shade it offers, rest it promises

Oil palm killed the sago
Oil palm killed our kin
Oil palm choked our rivers
Oil bled our land

Now the land is gone
And the river bleeds
Sago, the mother we once had
Sago, the mother we have lost

Now, no sago here will grow
No rivers here will flow
No gentle winds shall blow
No songs tomorrow know
Our bones your earth shall stow

[The lyrics above are the author's translation of a song originally composed in Marind by Gerardus Gebze, an Indigenous Marind elder from Merauke (West Papua). The song was performed by Gerardus during a hunting and foraging trip to a sago grove owned by the Gebze clan, and now targeted for monocrop oil palm development.]

Songs such as the one above are prevalent among Indigenous Marind of the Upper Bian borderlands of rural Merauke, West Papua, where vast swaths of native forest are being razed to make way for industrial monocrop oil palm plantations. These songs describe the disappearance of sago palms in the face of deforestation and agribusiness expansion. They speak of lost kin, bleeding rivers, and desiccated landscapes. They talk of hunger, sorrow, and loss distributed across species lines. They express the generalized destruction of life prompted by the proliferation of oil palm – a plant whose most devastating impact, Marind affirm, is that of 'killing sago'.

Sago, a pinnate-leaved palm of the humid tropics and freshwater swamps, is the source of Marind's staple food – sago starch. Yet the significance of the plant extends far beyond the pragmatics of subsistence. Sago palms, for instance, are sentient beings who share common descent with Marind clans from dema, or ancestral creator spirits. Like other forest plants and animals, the relations of sago

palms to their human kin are anchored in principles of exchange and care. Sago grows to support Marind by providing them with food and other resources. In return, humans must exercise respect and perform rituals as they encounter and process sago in the forest, recall its stories, and consume its starch. These reciprocal acts of care enable humans and sago to sustain each other's growth as inter-agentive members of a shared community of life within the eco-cosmology of the forest. As Oktavius, a middle-aged man from Khalaoyam village, described: 'The grove is full of life because sago knows how to share space with others. The sawfish rests in the rivers between its roots. The birds nest at the tip of its trunk. Insects sing with the wind in its fronds. Anim (humans) feed off its pith. Sago is a tree of many lives.'

The 'many lives' of sago, in Okto's words, encompass myriad organisms that thrive in and from the palm and its environment. Wild pigs, for instance, are attracted by the pith of damaged or deliberately felled palms and the cool waters of the sago swamps. Agile tree kangaroos and sugar gliders leap across the canopy while solitary spotted possums nest between tightly bunched sago fronds. Various avian species are drawn to the grove where they drink and feed, and to the safety of the sago tree crown where they roost and mate. These critters include inquisitive red-billed brush turkeys, emeraldine buff-faced pygmy parrots, swooping white-breasted wood swallows, silver-crowned friarbirds, and sharp-eyed grey goshawks. Sago's companion plants are equally plentiful. They include wild sugarcane, camptosperma, swamp oak, pandanus, Bishop wood, bur tree, and nipa palm. In the humid undergrowth, juicy ferns in circinate vernation surround the feet of sago trunks while plump paddy straw mushrooms flourish along mature boles and in piles of rotting sago pith. Termites congregate and nest on the palm in the wet season, while sago palm weevil grubs and larvae incubate in its stumps and pith. Borers and beetles abound in the grove alongside skipper butterflies and bagworms. The humid air is alive with the buzz of pollinating insects, including stingless bees, honey bees, and various wasp species. After it dies, sago continues to feed forest organisms, nourish the soil, and sustain diverse microbial, bacterial, and fungal communities with its rotting pith. The plant perpetuates its vegetal afterlife in the 'many lives' sustained by its generative decay.

The expansion of monocrop oil palm fragments the mutual lifeworlds of human and other-than-human beings in the nourishing environment of the sago grove. Few species can thrive in monocrop oil palm ecologies that are characterized by low canopies, sparse undergrowth, unstable microclimates, high temperatures, and a toxic mélange of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. The soil, stripped of its vegetation through large-scale deforestation and burning, becomes dry, flaky, and wizened. Water supplies, too, are depleted as plantation

irrigation diverts or arrests the flow of ancestral rivers. Robbed of their nutrients and symbiotes, sago groves collapse as the soil is depleted of minerals and the rivers contaminated by toxic sludge and chemicals. Meanwhile, the lively multispecies sensorium of the grove is replaced by sounds of death – roaring bulldozers, gnawing chainsaws, the crackle of illegal burning, and the rumble of overloaded oil palm fruit and timber trucks. Songs that once celebrated the multispecies relations of sago now describe the threat posed by oil palm to sago, humans, and other organisms, who are displaced or uprooted from their land and kin.



Drone footage of a newly established oil palm plantation in the Upper Bian. Credits – Sophie Chao

The destruction of sago groves also erases the multispecies stories (cerita) inscribed in the morphology of individual sago plants, which Marind discover through minute scrutiny and physical touch. For instance, sago palms managed by families that have borne many offspring and spread widely across Marind territory are identified by their particularly broad fronds. Thicker spines on the leaflets feature in the story of palms that had to defend themselves from parasitic insects, or ravaging forest fires lit by invading tribes in times past. The texture of the pith, too, tells the story of the palm. Where the pith is found to be particularly wet, soft, and dense, community members revel in enumerating the names of the various birds, insects, and mammals who collectively sustained the growth of the palm. Indeed, many palms are named after particular animals in whose company they matured and whom they eventually came to resemble – the ‘dog sago’, for instance, whose curly bole sheaths resemble a dog’s floppy ears, or the ‘cassowary sago’, whose palm cabbage is rounded like a cassowary’s casque. Certain palms are also named after Marind children whose birth occurred concurrently to their own. These infants are often carried in sago bags made of

fronds from their kindred palm such that, as Mariana, a young mother from Bayau village, told me, 'sago and Marind can follow each other's lives'.

Taking over grove and forest, oil palm severs the shared stories of growth, reproduction, and senescence of Marind and their vegetal companion, the sago palm. As the diversely rhythmic and intersecting life cycles that enliven the forest give way to homogeneous plantations, the call of birds marking the break of dawn, the fall of night, and seasonal transitions, become rare. The times of fruit maturation, bird and animal migration, and fish and amphibian reproduction, too, halt indefinitely. Each organismic death provoked by the arrival of oil palm thus marks the end of a living, fleshy temporality distributed across species lines. Each death obliterates the stories, places, and organisms inscribed in sago's bodily matter. Each death forestalls the possibility of a meaningful present and thwarts the shared futures of the forest's dwindling communities of life.

And what of hope in the midst of extinction? Kristofer, a middle-aged woman from Bayau village, once told me: 'Marind do not know the story of oil palm. It comes from a foreign place and it kills the sago. But maybe one day, oil palm will come to understand us and we will come to understand oil palm. Then, there may be hope. Then, there may be new stories.' Many Marind resent oil palm for its devastating effects on the multispecies lives and futures enabled by sago palms. However, others like Kristofer express great curiosity towards the foreign plant taking over their lands. Oil palm, too, I was often told, has a home, kin, and relations to humans and other organisms back in its native soils. As such, Marind are not indifferent to the lifeworld of oil palm beyond what they themselves experience in its destructive presence. Their animosity toward this introduced and harmful plant-being goes hand in hand with a recognition that oil palm, too, has a storied existence – with other beings, and in other places.

As Kristofer suggests, finding hope in the rubble of capitalist expansion will require that Marind find ways to relate to, and better understand, the needs, growth, and stories of oil palm – a plant whose proliferation currently undermines the possibility of multispecies hope. Imagining what that storied existence might be constitutes a form of care in the absence of the encounters and knowledges that enable plants and persons to make stories together. Then, perhaps, unexpected collaborations across species lines may enable more livable shared futures. Budding organismic assemblages may work together to remake the sentient landscape of the Upper Bian (at least a little) differently, and less violently. But whether, and what, the future can be will depend as much on Marinds' attempts to know the story of oil palm, as on oil palm's own willingness to partake in the shared stories of the forest and its sentient beings. Then, and only then, time will tell.

