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THE SAGO SPATHE

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA'S SEPIK REGION

ESG, Oz 1804

Papua New Guinea's Sepik region is a fascinating and culturally diverse area that encompasses a rich tapestry of traditional rituals, beliefs, and practices. Within this vivid landscape, the sago palm (from which the sago spathe is taken) holds significant meaning and serves as a vital ethnographic object that encapsulates the unique socio-cultural traditions of the Sepik people. As a man raised in the Sepik region where my mother hails from, specifically in the village of Wautogik in West Coast, Dagua, I have grown up surrounded by these rich cultural traditions and practices that define our community. Among these, the sago palm holds immense importance and is deeply valued for its diverse contributions to our village's identity and heritage. Drawing on my own experiences as a member of the Sepik community, this essay aims to delve into the multifaceted aspects of the sago palm, including the sago spathe,[1] examining its historical, cultural, and economic importance within the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea.

1 The sago spathe shown here with the inventory number Oz 1804 was acquired by Arthur

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The sago palm, scientifically known as *Metroxylon sagu*, holds significant dietary importance in the Sepik region. It provides sustenance to the local communities by producing starchy, carbohydrate-rich pith, commonly referred to as sago starch. To extract the starchy pith from the trunk of the palm, a labor-intensive process is involved. This process typically includes felling the tree and cutting it into manageable sections. The pith is then extracted, pounded, washed, and strained to separate the starch from fibrous materials. Finally, the starch is dried and prepared for cooking or storage. Throughout my upbringing, I have seen my mother (*yamo*), aunties (*makik*) uncles (*kandere*) and other community members engage in the process of extracting sago pith and transforming it into starch. This starch serves as a dietary staple and is extensively used in the preparation of an array of traditional dishes. When mixed with boiling water the starch creates a firm jelly, locally known as *nangu*. The high carbohydrate content makes it a valuable source of energy, especially in areas where alternative food sources are scarce. Living in the Sepik region, the sago palm and its starchy pith has been our lifeline for sustenance and survival for centuries, ensuring a reliable supply of food throughout the year. Without the sago spathe, our village would struggle to maintain food security and face greater challenges in adapting to changing climates and ecosystems.

Roesicke in the course of the so-called »Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss-Expedition« (Empress Augusta River Expedition) (1912/13) and sold to the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde (now the Ethnologisches Museum) in Berlin in 1913. Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss was the German name for the Sepik River during the colonial era. In 1939 the object came to the Göttingen collection as part of a donation from the Berlin museum of more than 200 ethnographic objects from Oceania. On the index card, the location »Tsingali« is noted.

As well as its central role in nutrition, the sago palm possesses considerable economic importance. Firstly, the dried starch is sold in local and regional markets. Beyond the sale of food, the leaves and stem of the palm are used to create intricately woven baskets and mats, which have practical, aesthetic, and cultural functions. The increasing demand for such organic and sustainable products in the global marketplace, and among tourists and visitors to our community, has allowed us to share our expertise and craftsmanship beyond our local community. The finely painted sago spathe, with its unique designs and natural beauty, has also become a sought-after item for trade, providing an additional source of income for our village. These economic aspects of the sago palm not only stimulate our local economy through a sought-after injection of money, but also helps in the preservation of our traditional artistic practices as well as the knowledge surrounding sago processing in the face of modern, industrialized production techniques.

Apart from its historical and economic importance, the sago palm also plays a significant cultural role in our society. Sago is not just a food source or source of income; it is an integral part of our cultural identity. It is regarded as a divine plant with a rich mythological origin. In many local belief systems, the sago palm is believed to be a sacred gift from the gods, symbolizing abundance and sustenance around the community and its people long before outside influence coming into the region. From a young age, I was taught about the sacredness and ancestral beings embodied within the sago palm and its painted spathe. The sago palm anchors us to our roots, reminding us of the generations before us who mastered the techniques of sago extraction. It symbolizes the resilience, knowledge, and spiritual bond between our ancestors, the natural world, and the present generation. Our rituals, ceremonies, and daily practices are intertwined with the sago palm, reaffirming our collective identity and instilling a sense of pride in our heritage.

The painted sago spathe is central to the cultural importance of the sago palm in Sepik societies. The creation of sago spathe artworks is an intricate craft that requires

skill and knowledge passed down through generations. The spathe is often adorned with intricate carvings and used as an offering to appease ancestral spirits during important ceremonies, such as initiation rituals, celebrations, and mourning rites. One notable ritual in the Sepik region that involves the use of decorated sago spathe is the initiation ceremonies of young boys into manhood. During these rituals, the spathe is carefully crafted into intricate headwear or masks that are worn by the initiates. This symbolizes their transition into adulthood and their connection to the spiritual world of ancestors. In ritual events like these, the sago spathe is not just a physical object, but acts as a vital conduit between the spiritual and human realms, connecting the people to their ancestral heritage.

Moreover, the decorated sago spathe is also important in the storage of sacred items in the Sepik region. The exterior of traditional ritual houses known as *haus tambaran* are adorned with painted sago spathe panels, which not only serve as decorative elements but also protect the cultural artifacts and sacred objects stored inside. This highlights the significance of the sago spathe in preserving and safeguarding the cultural heritage of the community. In today's world, passing on these knowledge and skills associated with the sago spathe to younger generations is crucial for the cultural continuity of the Sepik region. By teaching the craft and sharing the significance and meaning behind the spathe, communities can ensure that their cultural traditions, rituals, and connection to ancestors remain intact.

It is also important to address the issue of the endangerment of the sago palm species and the corresponding cultural tradition of sago spathe art. Unsustainable harvesting practices, increasing reliance on Western foods, deforestation, and climate change all pose significant threats to sago palm population in the Sepik region. These factors can lead to a decline in sago production and potentially impact the economic and cultural activities reliant on the sago palm, including sago spathe paintings. Efforts should be made to ensure the sustainable management and conservation of the sago palm species. This may include implementing regulations and guidelines for harvesting, promoting reforestation initiatives, and raising awareness about the importance of preserving this valuable resource. It must also include the safeguarding of traditional knowledge to ensure the preservation and continuation of the sago spathe's importance in our lives and culture. By taking steps to address the endangerment of the sago palm, we can help protect not only the economic significance but also the cultural and ecological value that it holds for the Sepik region. Through my personal experiences and connection to the Sepik region, I feel a responsibility to contribute to these preservation efforts. It is my hope that by raising awareness and supporting initiatives for sustainable management, we can secure the well-being of both the local communities and the sago palm itself for future generations.

To sum up, for me as a Sepik man, the sago spathe is not just a simple ethnographic object; as an art form and through its connection to the sago palm, it represents the essence of our village's cultural identity, sustenance, and economic opportunities. Its presence connects us to our ancestors, reminds us of our resilience, and fuels our pride in our heritage. As we navigate environmental challenges, preserving the sago spathe and the practices surrounding it becomes paramount for the continued flourishing of our village and the perpetuation of our way of life.