

Coconuts and Man on the North Coast of Honduras

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone interested in the natural and economic history of the Caribbean littoral is bound, sooner or later, to consider the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*). For example, today more than one and a half million of these palms grace the Caribbean edge of Honduras (Dixon 1981). To the casual observer, the endless stretches of coconut palms may appear to be a natural, random distribution. However, closer study reveals that the Honduran coconut landscape is not a natural one. Virtually every palm was planted and has an owner. Coconuts serve a multitude of economic uses from thatch and boat-building materials to human nourishment in the form of drink, food, and cooking oil; and they have become increasingly important in international trade. The fact is that in many Caribbean coastal zones, the coconut is of enormous cultural and economic importance.

Whatever the modern importance of the coconut to coastal populations within the Caribbean, the palm is probably not native to the region. A review of the botanical and historical literature reveals that the center of origin of the palm has been questioned for more than a hundred years and that it is very likely not even endemic to the New World.

This paper concerns the historical evidence for coconuts in the western Caribbean and the development of a coconut landscape along the littoral of northern Honduras (Figure 1). The chronological and spatial underpinnings of the palm's present-day distribution and usage can be traced back for more than three centuries, to when only a few palms were clustered around ports along the coast. From these early seventeenth century centers of distribution, fruit companies and subsistence cultivators increased the distribution and density of the palm. Today the spatial patterning of the palm and its present importance to coastal people hint at these historical antecedents.

ORIGIN AND DIFFUSION THEORIES

Theories on the hearth of the coconut propose that the palm had two sixteenth century points of diffusion in Middle America. In 1514 coconuts were present in isolated pockets along the Pacific coast of Panama and it is thought that these palms came from the Indo-Pacific region (Bruman 1944). How and when these palms arrived is unclear, but their small numbers, isolated distribution, and their unimportance to native coastal populations has lead scholars to speculate that these palms were relatively recent arrivals (Bruman 1944). By the end of the sixteenth century, Spaniards had spread coconuts along the Pacific littoral from Panama to Mexico (Bruman 1945).

By contrast, coconuts in Caribbean Middle America appear to have been introduced to Puerto Rico from the Cape Verde Islands in 1549 (Harries 1977). Subsequent dispersal of the palm throughout the Caribbean was rapid and by the seventeenth century coconuts were reported in many locations, including the north coast of Honduras by 1610.

The prevailing thesis, then, is that the coconut palms present on the Pacific coast of Panama by 1514 were Asian in origin while those found within the Caribbean a few years later were recent introductions from the Cape Verde Islands. Supportive of this thesis is the modern presence of a coconut variety on the Pacific coast called "Pacific Tall" that is closely allied with palms of the Indo-Pacific, whereas in the Caribbean, a distinctly different variety known as "Jamaica Tall" displays affinities closely related to palms of the Cape Verde Islands and east Africa (Harries 1977, 1978A; Richardson et al. 1978). Today, along the north of Honduras the dominant palm is the Jamaica Tall.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Evidence for the European introduction of coconuts to the Honduran Rimland is the following. First, there is no mention of the coconut in the literature on pre-Columbian Honduras, and linguistic evidence suggests that north coast aboriginal populations did not know the coconut before the Spaniards arrived. Paya, the aboriginal population of the Honduran north coast, used the terms *koko ka* for coconut and *koko pai-ha* for coconut grove (Conzemius 1927-1928: 290). These words are apparently corruptions of the Spanish term *cocos* for coconut, a term originating with Vasco da Gama who encountered coconuts (*Cocos nucifera*) along the littoral of [end p. 17]

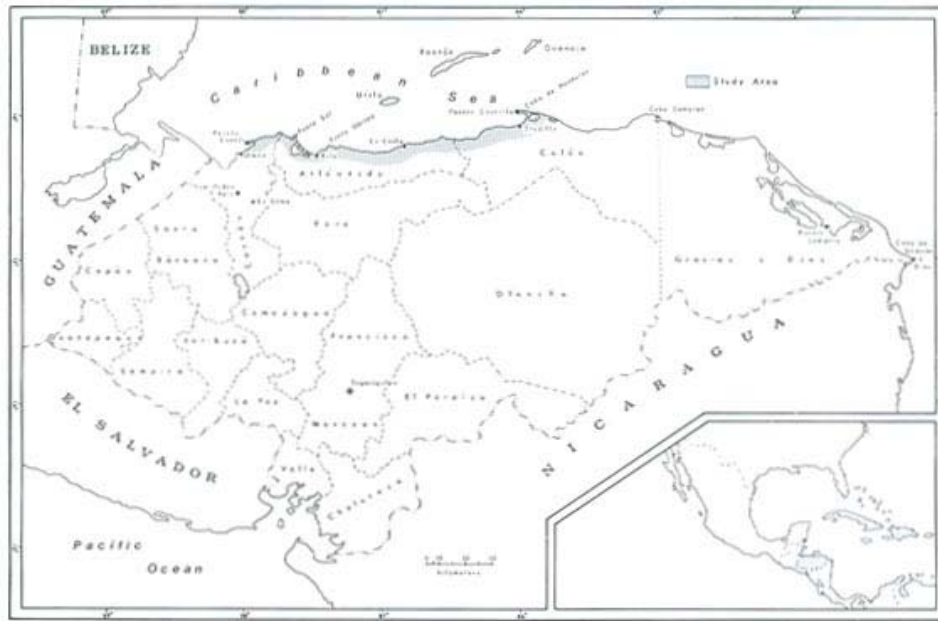


Fig. 1. The study area.

the Indian Ocean in 1499 (Furtado 1964). Vasco da Gama used the Portuguese word *cocos*, a term meaning evil or grimace, to identify the fibrous dehusked coconut whose three dark end spots reminded him of an evil hairy face.

The earliest account of coconuts on the north coast of Honduras comes from Vásquez de Espinosa (1942, 244), who in 1610 reported that a few coconuts were growing at the port of Trujillo (Figure 2). In 1639 Avila y Lugo reported coconuts being on the nearby Bay Island, Guanaja. By 1658 the neighboring islands of Roatán and Utila were noted for their abundance of coconut palms (Rochefort 1966, 37-38). How and when coconuts arrived on the Bay Islands and in Trujillo is unknown. Because of the importance of these locations as provisioning centers in the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it is possible that Spanish sailors introduced coconuts to these lands.

However plentiful coconuts may have been on the mid-seventeenth century Bay Islands, indications are that coconuts were not common on the adjacent mainland other than at Trujillo. The earliest record mentioning mainland coconuts, away from Trujillo, appears in 1723. In that year Nathaniel Uring, after having been shipwrecked, walked the entire Honduran coast from Cabo de Gracias a Dios to Cabo Camarón. Although this strip of coast is now covered with thousands of coconuts, in 1723 Uring encountered only one coconut palm (Uring 1726, 205).

Remarking how curious it was to find a coconut palm close to the water's edge yet far from human settlements, Uring eventually concluded the palm was a "drift coconut," a phenomenon that he had observed on the Pacific Ocean.

Whether or not Uring was correct in assuming that this coconut was a drift coconut, the question of its origin remains. At this time it appears that Trujillo was the only center for a concentration of coconuts anywhere near Uring's account. A drift coconut traveling from Trujillo to eastern Honduras, however, would have had to go against both the wind and long-shore currents, a feat that may have been impossible. A more likely possibility is that the nut drifted from the Antilles.

Currents passing through the Lesser Antilles sweep the Honduran coast, and according to Edmondson (1941) and Ward (1977), coconuts submerged in seawater for as long as 130 days are still viable. The average annual velocity of Caribbean currents flowing from the Lesser Antilles toward Honduras is approximately 22 miles per day, thus, it should take a parcel of surface water only about 70 days to reach the shore of Honduras from the Antilles.

Unexpected evidence on the speed with which a coconut might have drifted from the Antilles was provided in 1979, when, while doing field work near Trujillo, I found a bottle with a note in it. The bottle had been [end p. 18] tossed into the sea near Montserrat and had drifted across 1200 nautical miles in about 80 days. It is conceivable that a coconut set adrift in the Lesser Antilles could have reached the north coast of Honduras in viable condition. Certainly by the time of Uring's account, coconut palms were abundant in the Eastern Caribbean.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries coconuts were growing around the port of Trujillo and the adjacent Bay Islands.

Except for the mention of the drift coconut by Uring, however, the palm does not appear to have been present elsewhere along the sparsely populated coast. Late eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts indicate that the distribution of coconuts was spreading in the western Caribbean but was still limited to places where ships frequently stopped (Figure 2).

By 1800 the early coconut concentrations along the north coast of Honduras had become important for coconut trade (Rubio S. 1975). In 1803, 12,000 tons of coconuts were exported to the United States from Trujillo, and the island of Bonaca had exported 6,000 tons (Coggeshall 1858, 308; Douglas 1869, 38; Rubio S. 1975). Meanwhile the islands of Guanaja and Utila and the mainland ports of Omoa, Balfate, and Tela had become secondary centers where merchants could obtain cargoes of coconuts for export (Roberts 1827,276-278).

Around these coastal ports, small coconut plantations (*cocales*) were becoming an important economic activity, and the distribution of coconuts was no longer limited to a few port centers.

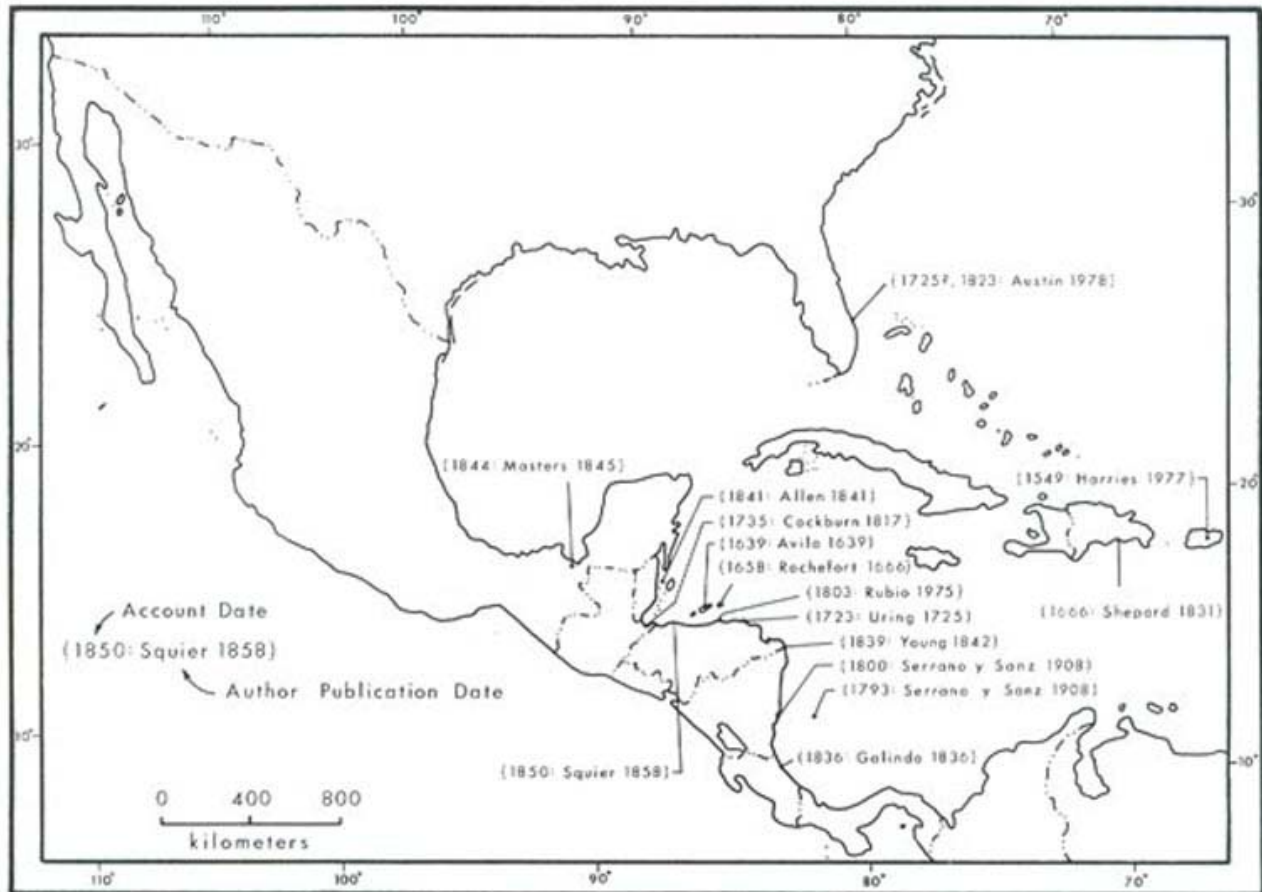


Fig. 2. Accounts verifying the dispersal of coconuts in the Antilles and along the Central American Caribbean coast.

During the mid-1800s the international fruit companies were formed. At first lighters periodically cruised the mainland collecting coconuts from producers for export. These coconuts were brought to protected harbors in the Bay Islands where they were transferred onto ocean sailing ships bound for the United States. The increasingly lucrative coconut trade encouraged commercial cultivation of coconuts; as a consequence, during the late 1800s and early 1900s, the number of coconut palms greatly increased along Caribbean shores. When in the early 1900s quick and dependable ocean steamers were introduced to transport tropical fruits, coconuts yielded to bananas and oranges in importance. Since that time coconuts have never regained their position as Honduras' leading fruit export. Today only the concentration of coconut palms around these former commercial operations testifies to the past importance of the palm.

By the eighteenth century coconuts also were important in the domestic economy. The subsistence oriented Miskito Indians, who today occupy the far eastern Honduran littoral, depend upon the coastal margins for their [end p. 19] food. The Miskitos probably obtained coconuts through contact with European seafarers, learning to use coconuts for animal food, and for cooking and household oils, as they still do today. Other coastal populations, such as the Garífuna (Black Caribs) use

coconuts in the same ways but also use the husk for fuel. Just how the Garífuna learned of the domestic value of the palm is uncertain for the Garífuna are not native to the Honduran coast, having been transported in 1797 from St. Vincent, in the West Indies, to the Bay Islands of Honduras. The palm was on St. Vincent Island in 1797 and had been on the Honduran mainland for nearly 200 years when, in 1801, the Garífuna began to disperse along the coast. Consequently, they may have used the palm in the Lesser Antilles and continued such usage when they were moved to the Honduran coast.

THE CURRENT ROLE OF THE COCONUT AMONG THE GARIFUNA

Within Honduras today, subsistence-based coastal populations are the country's leading coconut producers and consumers. The Garífuna plant thousands of coconut palms in and around their settlements and have undoubtedly been an important influence upon the palm's dispersal away from port cities. The ideal place for them to plant coconuts is on the beach directly in front of their dwellings. With hundreds of Garífuna planting anywhere from 5 to 15 palms per family, however, the availability of prime beach-front locations has been depleted. It has therefore become necessary for Garífuna to plant palms farther up and down the beach away from the settlement, thus "filling-in" areas between settlements with coconut palms.

Garífuna who own an abundance of palms maintain a prestigious position within the settlement. This is because each coconut palm is valued at \$8 (the equivalent of three days wages in 1981), and palms establish the owner's property boundaries. Because coconut palms are accepted property markers, the extent of one's property is limited by the range of one's palms. Although the beach is public land, planting coconuts enables people to establish unofficial claim to this territory: the more palms one plants, the larger one's property, or *cocal* becomes. When an individual dies, his palms are inherited by his survivors. Consequently, through inheritance, individuals can acquire coconut palms and property. I have talked with several Garífuna who have inherited hundreds of coconut palms in stands up and down the beach.

The coconut has become one of the chief dietary staples of the subsistence-oriented Garífuna. A family of five will consume up to eight coconuts per day, primarily in the form of oil (*qaraba*), which is included in almost every dish prepared whether it is baked, boiled, or fried. Coconut oil is also used as a rust preventative for tools, as body and hair emollient, and as an intestinal purge for gastric disorders. On the average, it takes ten medium-sized coconuts to produce one liter of oil.

Although the nut products are by far the most useful, Garífuna make use of the entire palm. Coconut palm fronds are sometimes used for thatching, but because they do not provide as tight a thatch as the much preferred cohune palm (*Attalea cohune*), coconut fronds are used primarily for boat sheds or for the temporary lean-tos of the nomadic fishermen. The outer husk (mesocarp) of the nut is sun-dried and used as fuel for household cooking. Sometimes husks are used as scrub brushes, or the outer fiber (coir) is tied into brooms. The inner, harder, shell (endocarp) is utilized as a drinking cup or water bailer for canoes.

Coconuts not only provide Garífuna with sustenance, tools, and pharmaceuticals, they also provide important cash income. At the local level, coconuts and oil are bartered among neighbors. Coconut water, a popular drink, is vended almost daily in coastal cities by Garífuna children. But, for the Garífuna, the most profitable trade use for the coconut palm is the selling of fresh coconuts to mestizo middlemen from the interior where the palm is rarely grown. These middlemen come to the coast, purchase a truckload of dehusked coconuts, and return to sell them in the highland markets.

The selling of coconut seedlings is also common in Honduras. Such dooryard operations generally consist of storing a few coconuts in a sand bed and allowing them to sprout and mature for several months. The Malayan Dwarf, a short, fast-growing variety resistant to lethal yellowing, is now the principal variety used in this trade. The casual dispersal of these palms is slowly changing the familiar coconut landscape of tall palms to one of short palms.

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS: THE FRUIT COMPANIES

From 1800 to 1900, the fruit companies drastically increased the palm's distribution and densities around mainland ports. Then, during the mid-twentieth century, the fruit companies turned away from marketing coconuts as fruit and produced instead copra and coconut oil for consumption within Honduras. In 1960 with the introduction of the more profitable African oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), which replaced coconut oil in the Honduran market, one fruit company, Standard Fruit of La Ceiba, again took to marketing coconuts from its older coconut plantations but now as fresh fruit for Honduras' internal trade and export to the United States.

These plantations (three) are now the most efficiently run on the north coast. Palms are planted in "squares" with plants about twelve meters apart. The plantations are constantly cleared of fallen fronds and encroaching grasses are kept down by grazing cattle. Ripe coconuts are collected from the ground, dehusked in the field, and size graded for marketing. Although these plantations are maintaining a yearly profit, the company plans eventually to relinquish full production responsibility to private individuals. Standard Fruit Company will simply buy and [end p. 20] market their select coconuts. Another means by which Standard has been able to increase coconut exports without adding to existing plantations has been to establish a

series of coconut collection stations in settlements along the coast. At each station a local purchasing agent buys coconuts from anyone interested in selling select nuts at a price regulated by Standard. The agent then gets the nuts to La Ceiba. The Garífuna are among Standard's most successful clients and eventually the company may handle all of its coconut operations in this manner.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The coconut is probably a relatively recent introduction to the New World. Coconut palms were present on the Pacific littoral of Panama in 1514 but were not particularly important in indigenous cultures. These palms came from the Indo-Pacific and are not of the same variety found along Caribbean shores. The coconut was introduced into the Caribbean in the mid-sixteenth century from the Cape Verde Islands; and by the early seventeenth century it had reached port centers on the Honduran coast.

In historic times coconuts followed people wherever they went around the Caribbean rimland, thus as populations increased, so did the coconut palm. By the mid-1800s coconut trade operations had extended the palm's distribution away from the Bay Islands and Trujillo. In the 1800s, the filling-in of unsettled coastal areas by subsistence populations, such as the Garífuna, helped to disperse the coconut palm. Today, the economic importance of the coconut is evidenced by its symbiotic relationship with coastal subsistence populations and by its incorporation into national and international fruit company trade.

The future economic importance of the coconut along Caribbean Honduras is uncertain. Currently it looks as though the palm is becoming less important as coastal populations become less subsistence oriented. As these populations shift away from their coconut dependence, however, they may still maintain their palms as a cash crop. Also, it is as yet unclear where the future centers for coconut palm activities will lie. Standard Fruit Company will probably abandon its *cocales* and become more involved with outside purchasing agent activities. If this occurs, areas where collection outposts are established will maintain their present coconut populations or perhaps expand. Where palms are not kept as a cash crop, their numbers will probably decline. Such shifting economic importance for the coconut may bring about a nucleation of coconut palm distributions centered upon collection outposts. Another changing pattern may be the increasing importance and eventual dominance of the Malayan Dwarf as the principal coconut variety along the coast as it is planted to replace older coconut groves killed by lethal yellowing. Whatever the changing economic and distributional patterns for coconuts along the north coast of Honduras, the coconut palm will probably remain a fixture in the landscape; but because of the growing dominance of the "dwarf" variety, the coconut may lose its status as the "tall" stately symbol of the Caribbean coastal lowlands.

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