

BRUNEI TODAY



THE HABIT THAT COULD NOT CHEW



TIMES AWAY



A clump of areca or betel-nut palms, known as Pinang in Malay, growing closely together from uncollected fallen fruits, which germinate easily.

Mayang, the palm's inflorescence, is usually associated with beauty and grace and was in the old days a popular girl's name.

PALM trees are among the world's most versatile plants, providing mankind with a host of benefits. There are believed to be well over two thousand species of palms in existence in the jungles, garden and farms worldwide.

The palms are important sources of food such as sugar, oils, dates, sago, copra and vinegar; soft and alcoholic beverages; furniture such as rattan or wickerwork; and building materials.

One of the well-known palms in Brunei Darussalam and the rest of the Malay Archipelago is Pinang, which in English is betel-nut or areca nut (*Areca catechu* of the *Palmae* family). The Pinang tree can grow to a height of 15 metres, has a slender trunk of about 45 centimetres in circumference and is topped by a crown of six to nine large fronds with pinnate leaves. The fronds have large sheathing bases, which leave circular scars on the trunk when they fall off. The trunk never increases in girth and it is said that the number of scars on it can help an expert determine the age of the Pinang palm.

Upih

Like the others, the betel-nut palm has been quite a useful plant especially in the old days when man-made building materials were either non-existent or not readily available. Here the Pinang hard trunk, which is without a single bough or branch, serves as flooring for houses in the rural areas in particular. It was also often used for building a makeshift bridge for crossing a small river or stream.

Its feltlike flower-sheath, which is known locally as *upih*, was utilized as wrapper for cakes, sweetmeats and other food before aluminium foil, oil paper, plastic bags and the like came into the lives of Bruneians.

The flowers, or *mayang* as it is called in Malay, were greatly sought after in bygone days by a man or a woman who, after a certain ritual and acting as some

kind of 'medicine-man or woman', went into a trance and dance about with the flowers supposedly to drive away evil spirits from a sick person or bathed the invalid with water from a large jar in which the flowers were immersed overnight. The *mayang* is also associated with beauty and grace and was at one time a common girl's name.



By : Ishak bin Haji Othman



Ripe nuts, whole and split.

*Clusters of ripe and young
fruits still on the tree.*



*Peeling off the husk of the
nut with a cutter called
kalakati.*



The palm's other components have also been used medicinally such as its roots, a concoction of which is an efficacious cure for dysentery.

Stimulating

But the best known part of the palm is its egg-shaped fruit, within which lies the nut. The fruit comes in clusters of up to 30 nuts, turn reddish when ripe and has fibrous covering or husks. To get the nut, the husk is cut away with a special cutter called *kalakati*. The round nut is also split and sliced with this tool.

Bits of the nut, together with a little quicklime and gambir (a

condiment made from the leaves of a climbing plant, *Uncaria gambier*), is wrapped in *sirih* or betel leaf (*Piper betel*) into a thumb-sized lump and chewed, turning the saliva red. Toothless old people use a small metal tool named *gocoh* to pound the lump before putting it in their mouths. Although habitual chewing eventually blackened the teeth, some folk never cared, arguing instead that it strengthened their teeth. Probably many of them also likes it because of its mildly stimulating effect.

Until not very long ago every household in Brunei Darussalam had for centuries at least a

A well-worn celapa, replete with the tool and ingredients necessary for making the chewing substance, namely kalakati, betel leaves, betel-nuts, quicklime and gambir.

The Pinang palms can also be planted as ornament, adding variety to the landscape.

celapa, which is a brass container for keeping betel leaves, areca nut, gambir, lime and kalakati. Many of the celapa (pronounced che-laa-pa) became heirlooms, further denoting its importance to society in bygone times when it was customary to open the celapa to your guest before any refreshment is served.



It is said that the habit was brought to the Malay Archipelago some time ago by Indian traders. Evidently by the 15th century it had become part and parcel of life among the Malays and local-born Chinese to the extent that a full celapa played, and still does, a culturally important role in many ceremonies including weddings.

One-tenth

As a result, the cultivation of the betel leaves and areca nuts was once a very profitable undertaking because both were in great demand. As years past, especially during the last few decades, the needs for making the chewing substance declined noticeably due probably to the fact that people, the younger generation in particular, knew

that it was as habit-forming as smoking cigarettes and did not relish the prospect of having blackened teeth for life as had happened to their elders. The habit may no longer be popular in Brunei Darussalam but it is estimated that one-tenth of the world's population are still habitually munching the betel leaves and nuts.

These days the betel is planted more for personal needs rather than for livelihood. Now and then, though, the leaves are being sold in the traditional open-air markets. The Pinang palm, on the other hand, still exists practically everywhere because uncollected fallen fruit germinate easily, particularly during rainy season.



Like the tea-sets, the brass celapa also comes in various styles.





A gocoh, which is used by toothless old folk to pound the chewing substance.



How to make the chewing substance, with a betel leaf as base.

The leaf, containing all the ingredients, is then neatly folded into a small lump before munching.

The betel, a smooth climbing vine, is propagated through stemcuts. Wooden poles, about half a metre apart, are erected besides the cuts in order that the growing vines can entwine themselves. Each mature vine constantly bears leaves, which are oval-shaped and have sharp pungent taste, about twelve to fifteen years.

Past

The leaves, when warmed and applied externally, have also been known to provide a quick remedy for a number of ailments including stomach-ache, cough, asthma, bleeding nose, swollen breasts of a young mother.

Although modernity has made virtually all of the usefulness of both plants a thing of the past, they still figure in some ceremonies notably weddings in which their roles appear to be everlasting. When '*meminang*', which comes from the word Pinang (the betel-nut palm) and means asking the hand in

marriage, many a traditionalists insist that the party going to the house of the bride-to-be should be led by an elderly person bearing a full celapa. Similarly when the prospective groom '*menghantar belanja*', which is the sending of wedding expenses and other gifts, a lovely

arrangement of the betel leaves, referred to as *sirih junjung*, will be at the head of the party.

How the word Pinang is linked to marriage proposal has never been quite clear but one can only surmise that the association is probably derived from the inseparable roles of the betel leaves and betel-nuts in the making of the chewing substance.

Thus, times may have partially chewed away the habit but the usefulness of the betel leaves and Pinang palm will live on in the minds and traditions of Bruneians.

A sheathing base of the betel-nut palm's frond or upih, which leaves a ring-like scar on the trunk.





The betel vines with their leaves.



These young palms, grown only as ornament, are a close family of the Pinang but have larger trunks when fully grown and much smaller fruits.

The sirih junjung, carried in a silver receptacle, precedes other pre-nuptial gifts. Nowadays the gift bearers are mostly young people, unlike the old days.





The Basong river flows amidst verdant surroundings.



The plant called Basong from which the place got its name.

The Taman Rekreasi Sungai Basong

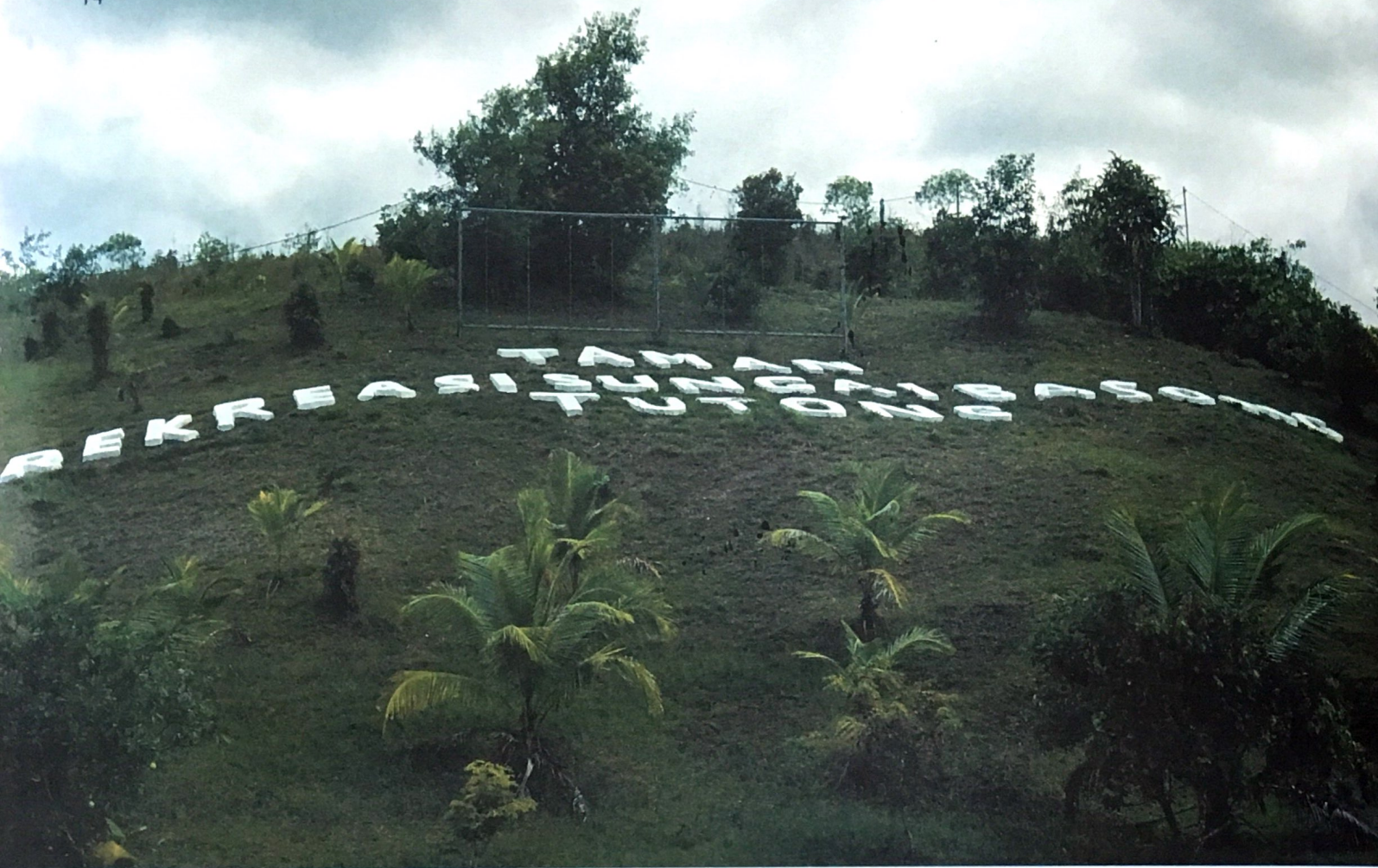
TURNING certain lovely sections of the jungles into places of recreation is one way of making the people aware of their environment in its natural state and the needs to love and protect it and making them at the same time part of the on-going efforts to save the forests for future generations.

With this in mind, the authorities have established in the country several forested

venues of recreation that are suitable not only for unwinding but also for purposes of scientific research and training.' One of these is the Taman Rekreasi Sungai Basong Park in Tutong District.

Lee-u

Sungai Basong or Leeyu Basong, as it is originally called in the Tutong ethnic dialect, means the Basong River in English. Basong in the Tutong



dialect is a plant of the *Pandanus odoratissimus* family or a screw-pine species, so called because of the screw-like arrangement of the leaves. Some time ago there used to be quite a lot of these plants growing on the banks of the river. Henceforth the Tutong ethnic people called it Leeyu (pronounced Lee-u) Basong.

The Basong plant thrives well on sandy soil. It has slender leaves with spikes on both edges and bears fruit that turn light red when ripe. The fleshy base of the fruit and the kernel inside are edible. The leaves were widely used in the old days for making mats.

Reservoir

Before its designation in 1988 as a public park or garden, Sungai Basong was for many years beginning 1960 a water reservoir that supplied potable

water to no fewer than nine villages in the district. It ceased operations only after the completion in 1973 of the Sungai Layong Water Supply Scheme, which is located just outside Tutong Town.

The parks' name written in large bold letters on a hill slope near the entrance.

A three-way bridge.





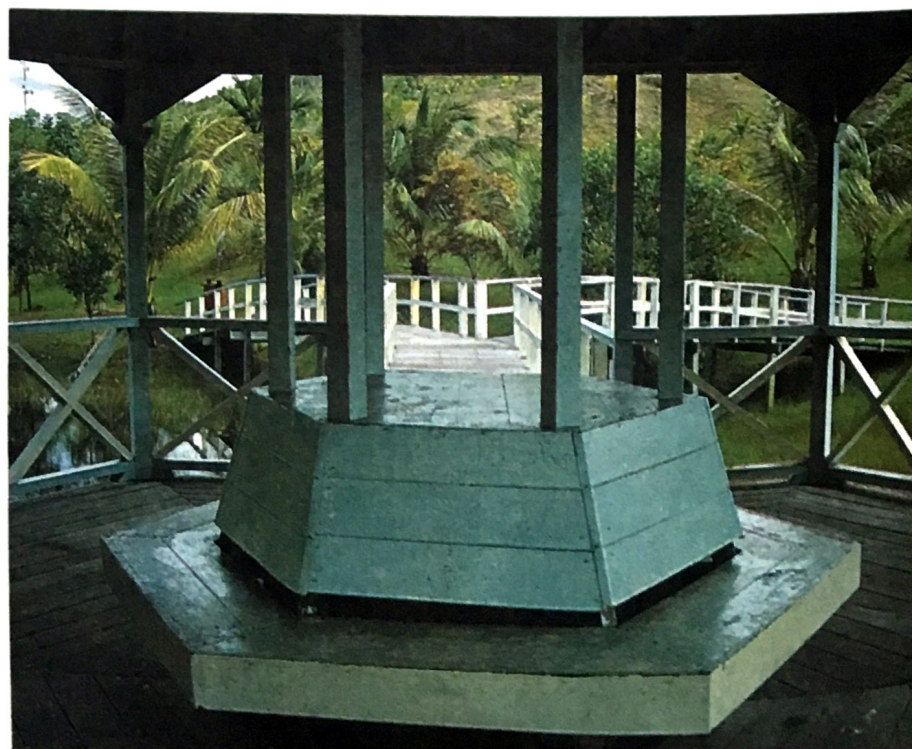
The park maintenance hut built in a traditional Malay style.

A pavilion is linked to wooden bridges spanning a section of the river.





A pavilion, constructed in symbolic Malay style, is partly hidden by the lush growth of ornamental trees.



What inside one of the pavilion looks like.



To add variety to the scene, a few of the pavilions are built in the river.

Another pavilion is found among the trees, slightly on higher ground in a different part of the park.



This man-made cave is a popular attraction among visitors, especially children.

The park, situated at Bukit Bendera in Tutong Town, is made up of 20 hectares of natural features such as lush vegetation, hillocks and cool freshwater. The Tutong District Office, which is responsible for its development and maintenance, has created a number of attractions including footpaths, small pavilions and wooden bridges across the river.

Ecotourism

Apart from the original vegetation, the District Office has planted a variety of flowers as well as coconut and other trees as ornament, giving a further boost to the beauty of the place.

In keeping with the desire to encourage ecotourism in the country, a restaurant, in addition to the usual hawkers, has already started business at the park.

Like any forested recreational area in the country, the Sungai Basong Park is an ideal place for



Water lilies virtually blanket this portion of the river.

day-trippers who want to go for a picnic with the family, take a walk in the woods or just relax and sit among the natural surroundings.

A bridge zig zags across the river. In the background is the entertainment building used for certain functions.



Some of the colourful flowers seen at the park.





*The first restaurant at the park,
and it opens everyday of the
week.*

*A court, where various games
can be played, is also available
at the park.*

Part of the children's playground.



