

# COCONUT MIDRIB— LOWLY PART OF COCONUT

By Josefina C. Suharto

The coconut is one of nature's most useful gifts to humanity. It is indispensable in the daily existence of millions of inhabitants of the tropics where every part of the coconut, even the most minor, finds its usefulness spanning beyond meeting the basic needs of mankind.

The coconut midrib or *ekel* as known in Sri Lanka or *tingting* in the Philippines, is a minor part of the coconut tree. At first glance, it is not easily visible as it is intricately hidden among the strong leaves it supports. Its importance is likely not readily recognizable as its utility is often overshadowed by the major products coming from the other parts of the coconut. And sometimes its prominence arise only if a typhoon hits the coconut tree or a pest or a disease that leaves the tree incapacitated to continue its productive functions.

It might sound contradictory to some, but coconut trees are often the most severely affected whenever natural calamities occur in any coconut producing area. And one common sight after a storm, for instance, is fallen fronds which are used as fuel or simply left to rot along the roadside.

But mankind's ingenuity and research have slowly elevated the lowly midrib to be at par with its other peers in the coconut tree. Nowadays, fallen coconut fronds are no longer left to rot on the grounds, or to cover the nuts stacked along the roadside, or end up as fodder for the kitchen stove. In the coconut tree, the *ekel* and the leaves are one. While uses for the coconut leaves

which are wider in scope could also be considered for the *ekels*, mankind's varied requirements have brought about specific usages for the *ekels*.

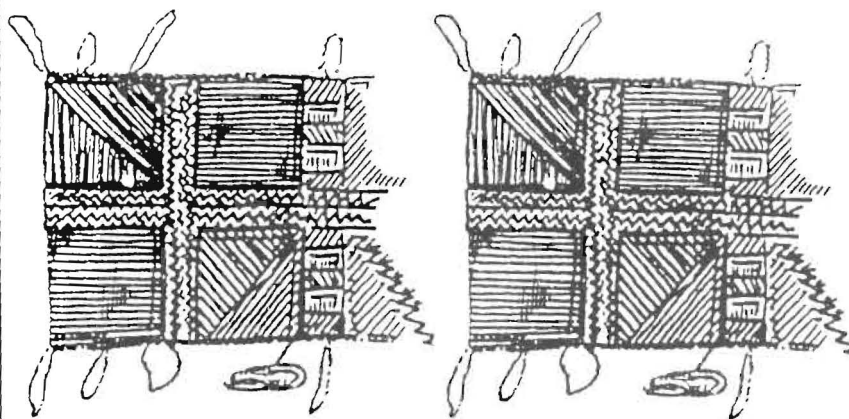
## Basically as broom

Basically, the coconut midribs are made into brooms. Even at this age where mechanical or electrical household aids lend ease to household chores, the coconut broom is still an indispensable partner in the trilogy of cleaning items including the rugs and the husk. While the broom prepares the preliminaries, the husk for its shine and the rug for the spick and span results. The coconut broom is wielded to get out dirt

from the Philippines, indicated that the *walis tingting* or broom was in handy to clean up the dust from the dried dust brought about by the eruption of the Pinatubo volcano that blanketed the Manila International airport few years back.

## 27 uses for midribs

In many of the coconut producing countries, the uses of the coconut *ekels* are varied, but mostly traditional in nature. So much so in the Pacific region, every part of the coconut tree has a specific role to play in the lifestyle of the people. The Samoans, for instance have identified about 27 uses for the *ekels*. About half of them is for



In Samoa Upeti, a matrix for dyeing 'tapa' is made of 'lapalapa' or the midrib of coconut leaf

from between floor boards and cobwebs from the ceiling, cleaning the yard of dried leaves and even for cleaning the garage and bathroom floors. Housewives could attest to the fact that brooms from coconut midribs are sturdy and last longer than brooms made from comparable material. One report coming

from the Philippines, indicated that the *walis tingting* or broom was in handy to clean up the dust from the dried dust brought about by the eruption of the Pinatubo volcano that blanketed the Manila International airport few years back.

the '*lapalapa*' or the midrib of the coconut leaf and about the same for the *tuaniu* or the midrib of the coconut leaflet. According to the local people, to name a few, the '*lapalapa*' is used for tobogganing down slopes, as an instrument used in tattooing, or used as clubs for fencing in a sport called 'aigofie' etc. The

*tuaniu* meanwhile is used for making the 'enu igana' or the fish scoop, for floral arrangements, as native brooms or as a noose to catch shrimp.

The Micronesians meanwhile, have a certain belief that fish traps made of coconut ekels catch more fish than that of other materials like hard wood or bamboo. There is no particular reason for this, but some say that the midrib must be clean so that the fish that come close to the trap will not be afraid of the leaves that are left hanging on the midrib. Furthermore, the midrib is much better than the small pieces of sticks as they are not only stronger but also last longer.

Moreover, they say that it is not necessary to buy brooms in Micronesia. They are being made out of the hard midrib of the coconut leaves. First a large branch is cut off and with the use of a knife, the midribs are removed and made into a bunch. Once a good sized bunch is ready the larger portion is tied tightly either with a rattan or a string.

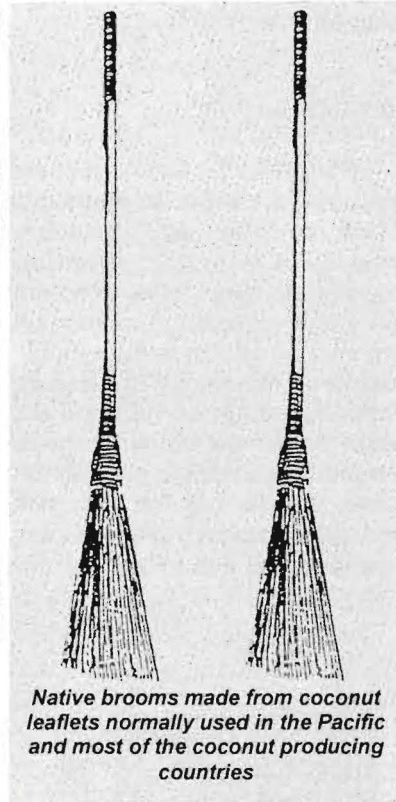
Indonesia and other countries in the Malay archipelago, meanwhile, use brooms made of ekels to dust off the bed sheets when tidying up the bed.

### Home of the ekel

It is in Sri Lanka, however, that the ekel is being utilized to the fullest both on the commercial and domestic scale. In Sri Lanka ekels are used for many purposes ranging from household to religious, and also as a foreign exchange earner. Records show that ekels have been shipped out of the country for the last three decades since 1969. In 1997, a total of 8,585 metric tonnes of ekels valued at Rs. 82.41 million were exported to a number of countries. Exports of coconut ekel continue to be on the rise and subsequently

making significant contributions to the country's coffers.

Although the coconut is synonymous to any ceremony be it religious or otherwise, the coconut ekels, however, have specific uses. In Sri Lanka where Buddhism is the predominant religion, 'Pahan Kanuwa' is a



temporary decoration of oil lamps in a Buddhist ceremony. Rings of coconut ekels are fixed to banana trunk and the coconut oil lamps are placed in these rings. Its 'Pirith Mandappa', a temporary chamber where chanting of Buddhist scriptures are usually held, is also made up of coconut stalks, leaflets and midribs. Coconut ekels are also made into toys in Sri Lanka. Along with very tender coconut, spirited tots turn into a toy sewing machine or a toy rockets or some still turn them into galloping horses.

### Handicrafts

It is only in the recent past that the Philippines have

developed the ekel into one of the non-traditional export items from coconuts. For almost a decade, the ekel is now being converted into handicrafts and these could be found in stores particularly those that cater to the tourists. These are likewise woven into many kinds of baskets, place mats, wall decors or even as food trays. It could also be used for wall décor and in making flower arrangements. According to a Philippine coco-based handicraft exporter, the midrib is the cheapest material being exported by them and 6 years ago, its cost was about US20 cents per bundle of 2 inch diameter.

However, these exporters have found certain limitations in the coconut midrib. Although this is the cheapest and the most available coconut by-product for handicrafts, they said that this material is brittle and difficult to weave. In view of this, there are only two provinces in the Philippines that can produce coco midrib-woven materials, although the country is a major coconut producer in the world. Furthermore, the midrib is also difficult to finish; it will not absorb paint or dyes and is difficult to apply appliques to it.

Solutions meanwhile have yet to be evolved to fully maximize its value and its utility.

The midrib is still considered a lowly part of the coconut tree. But it has metamorphosed and is gradually reaching that level where its usefulness, though, not at par, with the major parts of the coconut tree has already been recognized. □

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