

The Origin of the Name Cabbage Tree for Cordyline Species in New Zealand

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During the 17th Century the common name "cabbage tree" was used for palms by English-speaking people in the West Indies and elsewhere. Sailors on naval and merchant ships plying in the area carried the term to England and most English-speaking tropical lands.

Journals of early New Zealand explorers used the name for the nikau palm, *Rhopalostylis sapida*. The first published use of cabbage tree for a *Cordyline* species which has been located is that of Polack in 1838. After a period of transition the use of the term for *Rhopalostylis* was dropped and cabbage tree became reserved for *Cordyline*.

In recent years editors of new editions of early New Zealand explorers' journals have sometimes supplied misleading or incorrect information in footnotes concerning cabbage trees, mainly because they thought Cook's expedition created the name in New Zealand.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933) states:

"Cabbage

3. The tender unexpanded centre or terminal bud of palm trees, which is in most species edible, and is often eaten, though its removal kills the tree.

"1638 T. VERNEY in *Verney Papers* (1853) 195 Cabiges, that grows on trees, some an hundred feet high. 1697 DAMPIER *Voy.* I. 166. The Cabbage itself when it is taken out of the leaves . . . is as white as Milk and as sweet as a nut . . . 1756 BROWNE *Jamaica* (1789) 347. The Coconut Tree . . . The tender shoots at the top afford a tender green or cabbage." . . .

"Cabbage-tree.

1. A name given to several palm trees, whose central unexpanded mass of leaves or terminal bud is eaten like the head of a cabbage."

After naming five such palms in the West Indies, Southern U.S.A., Brazil and Australia it continues: "1725 SLOANE *Jamaica* II 110. This is most evident in the top of that called the Cabbage Tree. 1756 P. BROWNE *Jamaica* 342 The Barbadoes Cabbage Tree . . . is the most beautiful tree I have ever seen. . . . 1779 FORREST *Voy. N. Guinea* 123 . . . We saw many aneebong or cabbage trees growing . . ."

"2. Other trees and plants, so called for various trivial reasons as the Cabbage-bark Tree *Andira inermis* of the West Indies; a palm-like liliaceous plant of New Zealand, *Cordyline indivisa*, bearing a head of narrow leaves." Then follow the names of three other trees from St. Helena, South America and the Canary Islands.

From these references it follows that the term cabbage tree arose early in the 17th Century, was carried thousands of miles from its Caribbean origin by sailors such as Dampier writing on the Australian coast in 1697, and was used in Jamaica well before 1769 and soon afterwards in New Guinea. Thus it was widespread round

the world at the time Cook made his voyages. The usage still continues today in South Carolina, Florida, the Caribbean, Malaysia and Australia always because the trees can be used in the same way as cabbage for food. (Milne L. and M. 1967), (Maiden J. H. 1922), (Hylander C. J. 1968), (Whitmore T. G. 1973).

In Vol. II of *Cook's Journals* (Beaglehole Ed., 1955), referring to the discovery of Norfolk Island in October 1774, Cook wrote, ". . . Produceth abundance of small Cabbage Palms", followed by a note quoting Hawkesworth (1773): "The Cabbage trees or palms were not thicker than a man's leg from 10 to 20 feet high, they are of the same Genus with the Cocoanut trees with large pinnated leaves like them and are the same as the second sort found in the northern parts of New South Wales. The Cabbage is properly speaking the Bud of the tree. Each tree produceth but one cabbage, which is situated at the Crown where the leaves spring out and is inclosed in the stem. The cutting off the cabbage effectually destroys the tree, so that no more than one can be had from the same stem. The Cocoanut and some others of the Palm kind produce cabbage as well as these. This vegetable is not only wholesome but exceedingly palatable and proved the most agreeable repast we had had for some time."

This then was the meaning of cabbage tree as understood by Cook and his officers at the time of the exploration of New Zealand. But in the *Manual of the N.Z. Flora*, Cheeseman (1906) wrote, "*Cordyline australis*, universally known to New Zealand residents by the inappropriate name of cabbage-tree." How did this inappropriate name come to be used in this way?

Johannes Andersen (1925) considered its origin. He covered a number of the points below but although he reached, in part, the same conclusions, he was puzzled as to how to reconcile Cook's use of the name with his own previous understanding of its meaning. Having quoted Cook's definition of a palm (above) he then wrote, ". . . the remarks that the leaves are pinnate, that each tree produces but one cabbage and that the cutting of it destroys the tree lead one to suspect that the tree referred to is not a *Cordyline*". This suggests that Andersen had previously thought of cabbage tree as a *Cordyline*, but his final conclusion was that Cook by that name meant *Areca sapida* (*Rhopalostylis sapida*) and that it had been created as a new common name for the palm we now call nikau. Had he been aware of the O.E.D. (1933) information he would have seen that although he was correct as to Cook's definition of a cabbage tree, he had erred in ascribing the origin of the name to Cook's expedition. Finally, he decided that the name, although applied initially to *Areca sapida*, had later become transferred to *Cordyline*. How this came about and some of the errors arising out of the transition are considered now in detail.

The origin of the present New Zealand name seems obvious.

Almost every author writing about New Zealand since 1769, commenting on his first sight of *Cordyline* species, states that they looked like palms, e.g. Forster G. (1777), William Anderson (Reed 1969), Samuel Butler (1863) and countless others. But as cabbage tree was the usual colloquial name for a palm among sailors and travellers, the sight of a *Cordyline australis* simply evoked the name "Cabbage Tree". No eating of cabbage was implied, it was purely the common man's botanical name that he was familiar with. As no English speakers settled permanently in New Zealand until 1792 (Sinclair 1961), the names we inherited from Cook came back to New Zealand via the charts, journals and books (published and unpublished) of the voyages. Few if any names were passed by word of mouth, but "flax" and "tea-tree" published after the second and third voyages were common in New South Wales before New Zealand was settled.

Neither Cook's nor Banks' journals appear to have used the name cabbage-tree for *Cordyline*, whatever the crew may have called them. But after 1792 the sealers, whalers and traders who were the first pakeha residents began to do so with scant regard for botanists. The first published use of the name seems to have been by Polack, a trader and speculator based in Kororareka in the early 1830s, who wrote (Polack 1838), "pointed to a ti or cabbage palm tree." The missionaries, whose main concern was with the Maoris, used the Maori word "ti" for *Cordyline*, just as everyone used the Maori names for other trees such as kauri, rimu and kowhai. What was wrong with ti as a name? Simply that when "tree" was added, as is English custom in pine tree, plum tree, etc., you got ti-tree which was ambiguous. The difficulty is clear if we consider statements by Angas (1847): "The tea tree shrub (*Leptospermum*) was in full bloom" (and the next page) "An occasional ti-tree (*Dracaena*) gives a foreign and palmlike aspect to the swampy ground." This is understandable if read but ambiguous if spoken, unless the clumsy generic names are added. Thus, if for no other reason than clarity, cabbage tree triumphed over ti.

So while the sailors, artisans and settlers called *Cordyline* cabbage tree, the missionaries and the writers of books called it ti, ti kouka, whanake, etc., and used the name cabbage tree for the nikau. None of the missionary authors J. L. Nicholas (1817), Richard Taylor (1855), W. R. Wade (1842) or Colenso used the name cabbage tree for *Cordyline* before 1864. Foremost among scientific writers at the time was Ernst Dieffenbach, the scientist with the New Zealand company, who in *Travels in New Zealand* (1843) wrote, "The missionaries who were of great help to me in compiling the dictionary have adopted the orthography as I have given it." In this dictionary he lists, Nikau . . . the cabbage palm (*Areca sapida*), Ti . . . the sweet root of the dragon tree. Angas, mentioned above, was a friend of Dieffenbach and used similar

terms (1847). Others who followed suit were Ensign Best (1842), Wade (1842), C. Heaphy (1846), Edward Shortland (1851), Percy Smith (1953), Taylor (1855) and Kerry-Nicholls (1884).

In spite of this it seems that the common man was now calling *Cordyline* "cabbage trees", because when Thomas Brunner made his famous journey in the interior of Nelson and the West Coast in 1846-48 his diary, first published in newspapers and republished by Taylor (1959) states, ". . . (we) collected a quantity of the roots of the ti or cabbage tree which we placed in a humu or native oven for the night".

This period when the writers used the name "cabbage tree" for nikau and the common man in New Zealand used it for *Cordyline* has caused editors some difficulty. Taylor, who quoted Brunner as above, objects (in the same book) to Heaphy when he writes, ". . . wooded with rata and nikau or cabbage palm". The editorial note is: "Heaphy here seems to confuse two different trees, the nikau palm and the ti or cabbage tree." Clearly Heaphy is not confused, he is just following the authority of such men as Dieffenbach.

The struggle went on from about 1840 to 1863, most writers apparently feeling that cabbage tree for *Cordyline* was colloquial and low class. The breakthrough came with a temporary New Zealander of independent ideas, Samuel Butler, soon to become the author of *Erewhon*. His family in England collected his letters written about 1860 and published them (Butler 1863). In the earlier letters he refers to ti palms but later loses his inhibitions and refers at least seven times to them as cabbage trees. "The cabbage tree or ti palm is not a true palm though it looks like one . . . The flax and the cabbage tree and tussock grass are the great botanical features of the country." In Colenso (1864) we find, ". . . the large Ti or 'Cabbage Tree' (*Cordyline australis*) . . ." and Hochstetter (1867) not only uses cabbage tree for *Cordyline australis* but includes an engraving of one entitled "Cabbage Tree", in case there is any doubt. Such an important book seemed to give the name the accolade; it was now respectable and became used more and more.

We find T. Kirk (1889) writing re *C. australis*, "Settlers and bushmen generally apply the unmeaning name of 'cabbage tree'." By 1900 the next generation appears to have forgotten the origin of the word. The first really popular book on our native plants, Laing and Blackwell (1927), states re *Cordyline australis*: "Its inappropriate name is said to have been given by the early settlers who used the young and tender heads in place of cabbage." This unfortunate statement has left its effect even today. But did settlers really use cabbage tree in this way either before 1840 or afterwards in the planned settlements? That some of them did try it as a cabbage substitute is perhaps true but little has appeared in published records. Those who did were probably misled by the name itself, by the statement by Taylor (1855) (see below) that the Maori had

eaten *C. australis* shoots, and by the knowledge that their Maori neighbours did occasionally use them.

Except for Colenso no early writers seem to have eaten cabbage-tree and written about it. In extreme hunger he ate it roasted and said, "... which though tough and bitter served to allay our pangs." (Colenso 1884). He makes it clear that he regarded it as a poor last resort, for later in a similarly desperately hungry position he says of nikau heart or rito, "affords good eating, a *bonne bouche* to anyone in my situation" (Colenso 1844).

"It is unlikely that any other organised immigrant group . . . had such a desperate struggle for survival" said K. Mooney (1963) regarding the first year of the Puhoi settlement. They found it almost impossible to live off the bush. "The nikau palm which provided them with shelter also provided them with their staple food. . . . The central part of the palm was found to be like cabbage when cooked and, when very young, like the heart of a lettuce." Other plant foods mentioned were "Punga fern", berries such as *tairaire*, and later when land was cultivated, "bidibidi made a type of tea and burnt corn something resembling coffee". These, supplemented by animal foods in the form of eels, crabs, wild pigs and wild honey, formed the bulk of the settlers' diet for the first year. Te Hemera, chief of the Maori neighbours, knew of the desperate situation and that they were on the verge of starvation. "Time and time again he loaded up their punt with peaches, vegetables and kumaras". But no mention is made of the use of *Cordyline australis* in this terrible first year.

A study of publications on Maori foods by Best (1925) shows that this use by Maoris was a very minor one indeed. He summarised much of the information available on the use of *Cordyline* as food by the Maori, and of 435 lines only 10 are about cabbage tree leaf buds or rito. These ten lines consist of a statement: "The tender shoots are also eaten and although rather bitter make a wholesome dish", repeated twice more almost verbatim. This is almost certainly a statement by Richard Taylor but appears first in *The New Zealand Journal* (1848), then in Richard Taylor (1848) and finally in Hochstetter (1867). Next Hone Tare Tiako reported that the leaves were steamed with birds and eels and their fat then mixed with the leaves to make "good eating". Clearly cabbage tree rito was an unimportant food, a relish rather than a staple item, and enjoyed by the Maori better when disguised by the taste of animal fats.

But *C. australis* was in fact a major Maori food, especially in the south, though not as a cabbage. It was the tap roots and the stem, too, which were steamed in the *umu* or *hangi* and called *kauru* (and other names) which were eaten. This use is attested by most early writers who travelled in Maori territory from about 1840 to 1850: Ensign Best (1842), Dieffenbach (1843), Edward Shortland (1851) *N.Z. Journal* (1848) and Stack (1971). All agree that it was a pleasant sweet-tasting food. Ensign Best says, "... it has the

appearance of a piece of oakum plentifully sprinkled with brown sugar, the flavour is remarkably agreeable something resembling licorice."

In the fifteen years preceding Cook's Bicentenary in 1969, a number of books produced to commemorate it contained botanical errors arising because authors were unaware of the above information. Most errors arose out of one memorable incident reported by both Cook and Banks, the cutting down and eating of a cabbage tree at Tolaga Bay on Sunday 29th October, 1769. A similar incident reported by G. Forster (Forster 1777) at Dusky Sound has also caused misunderstanding. It is important for the future that the records be set straight.

Cook's Journals (Beaglehole 1955) states, "We found one Cabbage Tree which we cut down for the sake of the cabbage." Hawkesworth has a similar statement (Hawkesworth 1773), and Banks (Beaglehole 1963) says "... and only once a Cabbage tree, the Cabbage of which made us one delicious meal." As the Oxford English Dictionary shows, these navigators were simply stating in the idiom of the time that they had cut down a palm.

The footnotes on these statements by editors in five different books are illuminating. The balance of opinion judging by Sir Joseph Hooker is that the tree cut down was a nikau (*Rhopalostylis sapida* Wendl. et Drude in Kerch. *Les Palmiers* 1878, 255) but there is a strong reluctance, apparently among New Zealand botanical advisers, to abandon *Cordyline australis* in spite of the anachronism implicit in this identification.

The most thorough note and surely the definitive one is that in Beaglehole's edition of *Bank's Journal* (Beaglehole Ed. 1962) which concedes that the plant was *Rhopalostylis sapida*. Seven years before in *Cook's Journals* (Beaglehole Ed. 1955) he had thought it was *Cordyline australis*.

Morrell, in his story of Banks (Morrell 1958), notes simply "*Cordyline australis*". A. H. and A. W. Reed (Reed 1969) quoted *Cook's Journals* from Wharton's Edition (Wharton Ed. 1893). Their note includes Wharton's note "Palm", but then goes on "*Cordyline australis* (Ti or Ti-Kouka . . . Palm Lily commonly known as Cabbage Tree . . ." with no explanation for their contradiction of Wharton.

In *Early Travellers in New Zealand*, Nancy M. Taylor (Taylor 1959) quotes Colenso who referred to the Tolaga Bay incident. He had written, "Tolaga Bay . . . and the first New Zealand Palm (*Areca sapida* Sol.) cut down for the sake of its edible top." He was quite familiar with the nautical and missionary use of cabbage tree for the nikau palm. Unfortunately the footnote in Taylor is: "Nikau palm (*Rhopalostylis sapida*), but it was perhaps a cabbage tree or Ti (*Cordyline australis*) which Cook's men cut down for the sake of the cabbage."

It is significant that Joseph Hooker, who had sailed with Sir

James Clark Ross on the voyage of the *H.M.S. Erebus* and was naturally familiar with the sailor's use of the term cabbage tree for palm, says *Areca sapida* (Hooker 1896). His three months in New Zealand with Colenso, Sinclair and others must have made him familiar with nikau and *Cordyline*.

There are further reasons for believing that the memorable tree at Tolaga Bay was a nikau. G. Forster, botanist and naturalist on the third voyage (Beaglehole Ed. 1955), noted the resemblance of *Cordyline* to palms and said they were not true cabbage palms but dragon trees or *Dracaenae*. Surely if the eminent Banks and Solander had adopted the common name cabbage tree for *Cordyline* spp. these later botanists would have carried on the practice.

As shown above, *C. australis* leaf buds are not very palatable and contain only a small amount of food. No one who has tried both kinds of rito would suggest that one cabbage from a *C. australis* could form as Banks had said, "one delicious meal" for a group of hungry officers. Yet most would agree that a well-grown nikau would have provided the basis of a splendid meal for them. The Puhoi settlers would have thought so.

In *Primitiae Florae Novae Zelandiae* (Solander's manuscript) Solander wrote of the nikau,

"ARECA SAPIDA

Habitat — in sylvis Nov. Zel. prope Tolaga, Opuragi, rara."

The latter part may be translated as, "New Zealand, scattered through forest near Tolaga and Mercury Bays. Further the name he gave to the species, "sapida," meaning palatable, implies that he has eaten the plant and found it very pleasant. Where did he eat it first? Clearly at Tolaga Bay.

Beaglehole's note in *Cook's Journals* (Beaglehole 1955) contains the statement: "The cabbage tree or ti, various species of *Cordyline* which grows magnificently on that hilly coast." If this is true it is quite at variance with Cook's "one" cabbage tree, and Banks' "and only once a Cabbage tree . . ." which agree well with Solander's, "prope Tolaga, Opuragi rara."

The incident at Dusky Sound is reported by George Forster (Forster, G. 1777), who in April 1773, writing about a trip with some crew members, says, "At a considerable height they met with three or four trees which they took for palms and of which they cut down one, and used its middlemost shoot for their refreshment. These trees, however, were not the true cabbage-palms nor did they belong at all to the class of palms which are generally confined to more temperate climates. They were properly speaking, a new species of dragon trees, with broad leaves, (*Dracaena australis*) of which the central shoot when quite tender tastes something like an almond's kernel, with a little of the flavour of a cabbage. We afterwards observed more of them in other parts of the bay."

From this the following points emerge:

- (a) The trees were *Cordyline indivisa*, first published as *Dracaena indivisa* by G. Forster himself. Confirmation of this is shown by:
 - (1) Forster said he found it at Dusky Bay (Forster 1786).
 - (2) He referred to *Dracaena australis* at Queen Charlotte Sound (Forster 1786) as another dracaena.
 - (3) It was a "new species" not *D. australis* which had been found by Solander, as Forster knew.
 - (4) It had broad leaves.
 - (5) Elsdon Best said, "A bitter principle contained in young leaves of *C. australis* is said to be absent in those of *C. indivisa*." (Best 1925). Hence the palatable flavour.
- (b) Forster distinguished cabbage trees (i.e. palms) from the *Dracaenae*.
- (c) Later writers have sometimes mistakenly assumed that this incident supported the contention that Cook regularly fed *C. australis* to his men.

As to Cook's well-known use of greens as food for his crew, it is probably that crew members, to curry favour with their captain, sometimes tried eating *C. australis* as they did so many other plants. They probably also called it cabbage tree. This, however, is very different from the statements of some recent writers that Cook and Banks named it cabbage tree in their *Journals* and had it cooked as an important and regular food item (e.g. Taylor Ed. 1959). There appears to be no direct evidence in any of the *Journals* of the cooking of *C. australis* even once.

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