

OBITUARY

Mohamad Shah bin Hj Mohamad Noor

Mohamad Shah bin Hj Mohamad Noor, born in the staff quarters of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, was the son of Hj Mohamed Nur bin Mohamed Ghous. Like his father, he spent his working life in the herbarium exceeding his father's record of 47 years' service by one year.

Born on 22nd January 1935, he received his education at the Anglo-Chinese School in Penang and the Tanjong Rhu Boys School in Singapore. After leaving school in 1954, his father encouraged him to follow in his footsteps and so Mat Shah began his career in the Herbarium in 1955 as a Plant Collector. When his father died in 1958, he took over his post as Herbarium and Museum Assistant. He rose to become a Research Officer. No sooner did he retire in 1993 than he was re-employed until his untimely death on 18th June 2003.

Mat Shah's father was exceptionally diligent (Burkill, 1958) and never lost the opportunity to collect plants. We even have a specimen of a banana he collected from the market in Mecca while he was on the haj! Mohamed Nur undertook the massive task of re-organising the herbarium to follow H.N. Ridley's five-volume *Flora of the Malay Peninsula*. Many of the covers in use today still bear his handwriting. Besides his vast knowledge of plant names, he also amassed a vast collection of plants from all over Peninsular Malaysia.

Mat Shah's service in the Herbarium overlapped with his father's for four years, which gave him an invaluable grounding both in plant identification and herbarium management. As a Plant Collector, Mat Shah accompanied the Director, J. W. Purseglove, on three expeditions to Sarawak in 1955, 1956 and 1957. The longest stint he spent in the field was when he joined the two Royal Society Expeditions to Gunung Kinabalu in 1961 and 1964 (see Appendix). Except for these expeditions, Mat Shah kept his own collecting books and numbering series and had collected more than 5,000 specimens by the end of his career. Not only did he collect in Sabah and Sarawak, he also collected extensively in the Peninsular Malaysia where he climbed many of the major mountains (Gunung Belumat, G. Bujang Melaka, G. Lawit, G. Ledang, G. Rabong, G. Tahan and G. Ulu Kali). He also collected continuously in Singapore, from time to time being involved in extensive surveys, such as that of plants in the Singapore Botanic Gardens in 1974 (96 numbers), the Seletar Reservoir area in 1971 (51 nos.), MacRitchie Reservoir area in 1976 (77 nos.) and the Pierce and Seletar Reservoir areas in 1981 (56 nos.).

He has recounted some of his experiences in the field (Waterson, 2003): "My father taught me always to bring a mosquito net, because it can protect you against centipedes and scorpions, even snakes. One night on Gunung Tahan about nine or ten o'clock, I was lying under my net and I saw a very big cobra going up and over the

top of the net. One of the porters got a parang but I told him not to kill it. Because the second thing my father taught me about the jungle was never to kill any animals. On Gunung Rabung, there were tigers. We met a very big one, but the kampung people assured us they were not man-eaters and never hurt anybody.”

Mat Shah worked through the most turbulent period in the herbarium's history as Singapore emerged from colonial status to independence and prosperity. There were more changes in Director in his 48 years than in the previous 80 years. The nadir was reached when rumours circulated worldwide that the Herbarium was no longer valued and was up for sale!

He also experienced two major upheavals when the entire herbarium moved (Kiew, 2003). The first in 1963 was forced because the herbarium building was threatened with imminent collapse. The 400,000 specimens were moved inside the cupboards, the Gardens' labourers providing the muscle to move the heavy, solid teak cupboards. The second was last year (2002) when the 650,000 specimens were moved out so that the new state-of-the-art Herbarium could be built on the same site. Sadly, Mat Shah will not be able to see the Herbarium settled into the new building in 2005.

For the second move, Mat Shah worked steadily for more than six months with our team of ladies, Juriah Sabudin, Rohana Mohd Shari, Sariah Zelani and Sugaranthara Davi, to bring the family and generic concepts up-to-date and number the families according to D.J. Mabberley's *Plant Book* and the genera and species alphabetically. At the end of six months each box was numbered with its family and sequence within the family. All the overflow of specimens (over 50,000) that had accumulated over the years that could not be fitted into the old herbarium cupboards was incorporated into the sequence. This systematic work paid off as it enabled the 10,000 boxes to be put straight onto the shelf in the correct order, all within 10 days. This re-ordering the Herbarium is a lasting legacy to Mat Shah's dedicated work.

Quiet, dedicated work characterised Mat Shah and his supervision of staff over the years was firm yet harmonious. He will be remembered by the many visitors to the Herbarium from all over the world for his courteous helpfulness. But it was most particularly for his extensive knowledge of plant names (Kiew, 2001) that made his service invaluable and led to his re-employment for eight years beyond retirement age.

In 1993, he underwent a heart by-pass operation, which, although it curtailed his plant collecting activities, did nothing to dampen his dedication to herbarium work. He passed away peacefully in the early morning of 18th June 2003. He was due to finally retire in August 2003.

His ability to identify plants and his knowledge of where plants grow in Singapore will be sadly missed. In the words of Dr S.C. Chin, Director: “With his passing, the tiny pool of specialist plant collectors and field botanists who can put a name to most things green, shrinks further.”

He leaves his wife, Madam Jamilah binte Osman, whom he married in 1963, three sons and a daughter, and four grandsons and three granddaughters.



Mohamed Shah in the old Herbarium.

H.M. Burkill, November 1959.

References

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Appendix: Mohamad Shah's Collecting Expeditions Outside Singapore (Bk Bukit, FR Forest Reserve, G Gunung, NP National Park, Sg Sungai)

1955

12-27 Sept. Sarawak – Kuching, Bk Kitang, Bau; Setapok, Sebanding; G Gading, Lundu, Sematan, Kampung Pueh (with J.W. Purseglove, specimens numbered under Purseglove's collecting series)

1956

16 May-20 June. Sarawak – Bako NP, Telok Asam, Telok Tajor, Lokosan, Sg Serai, Telok Wakang, Telok Delima, Telok Lakei, Telok Lomi, Bk Buan, Tau Range, Bk Mayeng, Bk Merseng, Tatau (with Purseglove & H.B. Gilliland)

1957

2-18 Feb. Sarawak – Bako NP (with Purseglove)
6-9 May. Malacca – Fish Culture Research Station, Batu Berendam
18-22 Sept. Negeri Sembilan – Jendaram Estate, Nilai

1958

26 Jan–3 Feb. Pahang – Sabai Estate, Bentong
5-14 March. Perak – Bota Kiri FR, Ipoh (with Kadim bin Tassim)
2-9 April. Johore – Bk Paloh Estate (with Kadim)

1959

- 1 Feb. Johore – Kota Tinggi Waterfall (with H.M. Burkill)
28 Feb-8 March. Kelantan – Kampung Gobek, Tamangan (with Kadim)
24 Aug. Selangor/Pahang – Fraser's Hill (with Burkill and Mohd Noor bin Jamaat)
21-28 Sept. Johore – Kuala Sedili, Teluk Jeroh, Tanjung Lembu, Sg Sedili Besar
(with Mohd Noor and on 26th with Chang Kiaw Lan)

1960

- 15-19 Aug. Pahang – Fraser's Hill (with Mohd Noor)

1961

- 18-26 May. Sabah – Pulau Gaya, Tanjung Aru, Bk Kepayang (with Kadim)
29 May-16 Aug. Sabah – G Kinabalu (1st Royal Society Expedition, with Chew W.-
L, specimens numbered under the RSNB series)

1964

- 10 Jan-20 May. Sabah – G Kinabalu (2nd Royal Society Expedition, with Chew)

1965

- 3-9 Dec. Perak – Maxwell Hill, Bk Berapit, Batu Hampar, Bk Kemunting (with Sidek bin Kiah)

1968

- 16 Feb-7 March. Pahang – Taman Negara, Sg Tahan, Sg Teku, G Tuan Skeat, Kuala Keniyan, Gua Luas, Sg Redap, Sg Belar (with herbarium of Forest Research Institute Malaysia, KEP)
5 April. Johore – Mersing
1 Sept. Johore – Sg Pencharang, Bekok

1970

- 31 May. Johore – Sg Bantang, Labis F.R., Bekok (with E.A. Heaslett & Samsuri)
9-22 July. Pahang – Taman Negara, Ulu Sg Sat, Kuala Kelepah, Ulu Sg Sepia, Kuala Aur, Ulu Sg Tembeling, Kuala Tahan (with KEP & Mohd Noor)
18-19 Aug. Johore – Bk Tangga Tujoh, Lak Heng Estate, Kota Tinggi (with R. Hill, Mohd Noor & Ahmad)
20-25 Sept. Johore – Sg Kahang, G Belumut (with KEP & Sanusi)

1971

- 29 Jan-4 Feb. Johore – Bk Pengantin, Sg Juasseh, Labis (with Ahmad)
22 April. Johore – Kota Tinggi Waterfall
5 Sept. Johore – Ulu Sg Segamat, Labis (with Samsuri Ahmad)
19 Sept. Johore – Padang Mulut, SE coast (with Ahmad)

1972

- 11-17 March. Kelantan – G Rabong, Ulu Sg Ketil (with KEP)
30 July. Johore – Sg Endau, G Janing (with Ahmad)
12-18 Aug. Pahang – Taman Negara, Bk Tersek, Kuala Trengan, Jeram Katak, Sg. Keniyan, Genut Tabing (with Ahmad, on 18th with Miss Lee Wai Chin)
30 Aug-2 Sept. Pahang – Fraser's Hill (with Miss Geh Siew Yin)
23 Nov. Johore – G. Lesong (with Ahmad)

1973

- 29 Jan-4 Feb. Kelantan – Gua Musang, Bk Brangkat, Bertam, G Brong, Kampong Sta (with Mohd Ali)
11 Mar. Johore – G. Panti East (with Heaslett & Samsuri)
10-15 June. Selangor – Ulu Gombak, G. Ulu Kali, Anak Takun, G Bunga Buah (with Mohd Ali)
23-30 Nov. Johore – G Lesong, Sg Rompin (with Ahmad)

1974

- 22-25 Feb. Kelantan – Bk Baka, Machang (with Ahmad)
27 Feb-1 March. Kelantan – Bk Yong, Pasir Puteh (with Ahmad)
31 May-4 June. Trengganu – G Tebu, Jabi, Sg Chabang Dua, Sg Belantan (with Ahmad & Mahmud Awang)

1975

- 11-14 Feb. Perak – G Bujang Melaka, Sg Chenderiang (with Ahmad)
15 Feb. Pahang – Brinchang, Cameron Highlands (with Ahmad)
16-17 Feb. Perak – Sg Selung, Sg Hidup, Telok Anson (with Ahmad)
12-16 March. Trengganu – G Lawit, Kuala Sg Bok, Bk Yong (with British Museum Gunung Lawit Expedition, with Ahmad and Samsuri)
11-17 July. Johore – G Ledang; Ma'okil, Cha'ah; Sg Batu Badak (with Samsuri)
23-28 Oct. Pahang – Bk Berkelah, G Serudom, Kuantan (with Samsuri & Sidek)

1976

- 3-5 March. Kelantan – Bk Bongkok, G Ayam (with Samsuri)
8 March. Kelantan – Ulu Sg Sat. (with Samsuri)

1978

- 9-13 June. Perak – G Bubu, Keledang Saiong FR (with Mahmud Awang)
5 Oct. Trengganu – Rantau Abang (with Samsuri)
22-26 Nov. Trengganu – Abang area, Jambu Bongkok, Gong Balai, Tanjung Juara (with Sidek)

1981

- 15 Sept. Johore – Jason Bay, K. Sedili, Jemaluang Road (with Ali Rahim)

1984

18-21 July. Trengganu – Bukit Tangga (with Mahmud)

1989

10-15 Feb. Sabah - G Kinabalu (to summit) and Poring (with E.P. Tay, specimens numbered under Tay's series)

20 Feb. Sabah – Nabawan (with E.P. Tay, specimens numbered under Tay's series)

1991

23-26 July. Johore – Sg Linggui (with E.P. Tay and Ali Ibrahim, specimens numbered under Tay's series)

1993

2-5 May. Kedah – Sg Badak, Changlun, Bk Perangin; Bk Enggang, Sik.