

OBITUARIES

Haji Mohamed Nur bin Mohamed Ghous, B.E.M.

MOHAMED NUR BIN MOHAMED GHOUS was born in Singapore "during Bulan Puasa" in 1898. This was before registration of births was a general practice and his birth appears to have been undocumented. In that year Puasa occurred during March. Later his birth was dated 22nd March, 1898.

His father was a Malacca Malay who travelled between Malacca and Singapore trading in cloth. His mother, Yang Chik binte Saman, was a Singapore Malay. They had four children, three boys and one girl.

Mohamed Nur's schooling was brief. He went first to the Kota Raja Malay School in Singapore. After that he attended the Lorong Pandan English School, a branch of the Government Victoria School.

He joined the Gardens service in 1911 or 1912 at the age of 13 or 14 years during the close of H. N. Ridley's directorship and was employed on collecting seed for distribution in Malaya and overseas. Much of this work was with hevea seeds for which the Gardens were the main source of supply.

After Ridley's retirement, I. H. Burkill was appointed Director. He arrived on 17th October, 1912, ten months after Ridley's departure. They had been months of less than standstill. The printed literature which had come into the office was in a heap on a table, thrown there as it arrived. In the herbarium the mounted plants were in their cabinets, but the cabinets were in no systematic arrangement. The Penang Gardens had been closed in mid-1910 and the land transferred to the Georgetown Municipality to make a water reservoir. The Penang herbarium had been transferred to Singapore. The sheets remained in the cabinets used in Penang, but no start had been made to incorporating it with the Singapore herbarium. Nor were the cabinets in any order, but simply stacked wherever there was room.

To set about sorting out the confusion, Burkill picked out Ahmad bin Hassan as Storekeeper and Mohamed Nur as Label Printer as from 1st January, 1913. The duties of this latter post were more varied than at present understood and Mohamed Nur had the run of the herbarium for his ability to label plants in the garden fitted

him for the same function in the herbarium. Thus began his association with the herbarium which was to continue for the rest of his life.

For the herbarium to be at all usable it had to be got into order. The cabinets were of miscellaneous sizes and did not block nicely, but by sorting them out the best use of space was achieved. This led of course to worse confusion in the sequence of families. Since all the herbarium sheets were in labelled folders (according to the Bentham and Hooker system), it was left to Mohamed Nur to rearrange them. Commenting on the ability he displayed in doing this, Burkill has said: "Nur means Light, and this is where he shone it". As science, whatever its context, is the pursuit of truth, it seems wholly appropriate to quote R. J. Wilkinson [A Malay-English Dictionary, 1955]: "**Nur** Ar. Light—whether the solar light by which men see, or the primal light that illumined chaos at the Creation, or the light of divine revelation that guides men to Truth". As Mohamed Nur was to give his life-work to the herbarium, and developed an innate perspicacity for botanical taxonomy, how appropriated was he named!

Nur's growing knowledge and an unusual habitual orderliness clearly pointed his career to greater responsibilities. On 1st September, 1916 he was promoted to become Plant Collector. His collecting was extensive and he held the post till the end of 1923, when the post of Herbarium and Museum Assistant having fallen vacant, he was appointed to it. I. H. Burkill, in recommending to Government his promotion wrote: "The subordinate whose name I put before you is singularly efficient and energetic, and is capable of higher work than that of plant collector. He has acquired a surprising knowledge of the latin names of Malayan plants, and by his methodical ways is calculated to keep the Museum and Herbarium in due order".

The post of Herbarium and Museum Assistant to which he came on 1st January, 1924 was held by him throughout the rest of his career. He retired on pension on 22nd March, 1953 on attaining the age of 55 years after over 40 years service which he was yet to extend by another 5½ years. At the time of his retirement he had acquired such a comprehensive knowledge of Malaysian plants, and there being no-one available to fill his late post, that after a break of one day as is required by regulations he was re-engaged in the same post. This he held to the day of his death, 7th November, 1958. During this time he saw the herbarium grow to be the fourth largest in Asia with a collection of about 400,000 specimens to which he personally had in no small measure contributed.

In the field, he visited most parts of Malaya; he also collected in Thailand, Sumatra and Rhio. In his earlier days he accompanied I. H. Burkill extensively over Malaya, and with Mohamed Haniff, Superintendent of the Penang Gardens, went to many places in the northern half of the peninsula, the most extensive expedition being made in January and February 1923 in Ulu Kelantan to the northern side of Gunong Tahan. After Holttum and Henderson had joined the Department in 1922 and 1924 respectively Mohamed Nur accompanied them on many expeditions between then and the war, from Langkawi and Perlis in the north to the southern end of the peninsula, from the coastal plains and the mountains of the west to the east coast and the off-shore islands of the Pahang/Johore group. He also went in charge of independent assignments and in October and November 1937 collected in Selangor for the Arnold Arboretum, U.S.A., in conjunction with the F.M.S. Department of Forests.

All his collecting is numbered in the field in the S.F.N. (Singapore Field Number) series and his collections are laid in the Singapore Herbarium with duplicates sent out to many other herbaria. A list of his major collecting trips is given at the end of this notice. On one of them he took the only known Malayan flowering specimen of *Bambusa pauciflora* Ridl. which he got on the ridge leading to the summit of Pine Tree Hill (4,780 ft.) on the Pahang-Selangor border.

Ridley's *Flora of the Malay Peninsula* was published between 1922 and 1925, the major part being out by 1924. With this as the standard record of the Malayan flora, the sheets in the Singapore Herbarium were rearranged in accordance with its sequence. This work naturally fell to Mohamed Nur and occupied him for much of 1924/25.

Immediately following on this Mohamed Nur undertook in 1926 the integration of the Perak Museum herbarium with the Singapore herbarium. And for several years leading up to 1928 he carried out various assignments for the F.M.S. Forest Department herbarium for which the F.M.S. Government gave him an honorarium. These services were in fact regularly rendered by Mohamed Nur right up to the time of his death and by the Gardens Department generally then and now as a part of the Department's fundamental purpose of studying the Malayan flora.

Mohamed Nur's contribution to the knowledge of the local flora is not marked by any list of publications. His efforts have been merged with and are contained in the publications of others to whom he rendered ready and competent assistance in undertaking

preliminary determinations of collected material. These determinations were made with an unusually gifted knack, but entirely lacking the substantial pedestal of scientific theory and precept, which of course he had never received. His ability to "spot" sterile material raised as much admiration as anxious doubts amongst the conventional, but so often could it be shown subsequently that he was usually right. Every generation produces a few men of genius, and here in a humble way was one of them.

In the field of botany as in other sciences recognition of merit is often acknowledged by co-workers by the use of personal names to label some object or phenomenon. Bestowing of personal names for new species or genera of plants is common and Mohamed Nur's name has been given to several species which are listed below. In a similar but official manner Government in recognition of his long and faithful service awarded him the British Empire Medal in 1956.

During his last few years of service he suffered increasingly from breathlessness, but he refused steadfastly to take life more easily. He maintained that if he stopped working he would quickly die. Since there was no immediate replacement for him and since he lived solely for his work it was to his and to the Gardens' advantage that he stayed in harness. Even during the Muslim fasting month (Bulan Puasa) of 1958, which period to younger men in the best of health is deemed a test of moral and physical endurance, he refused to consider any adjustment of his working hours. His objection was simple: he did not want to be different. But in fact he was different in so many ways of punctilious honesty towards his work. A single example will serve to show his faithfulness. During the final fortnight of the Japanese military onslaught against Singapore in 1942, when all was sudden death, chaos and confusion, and again in 1945 at the time of the collapse of the Japanese hegemony, the office attendance register shows that Mohamed Nur reported with regularity for work, and at the height of these periods of the subordinate staff only he and his life-long colleague 'Che Ahmad bin Hassan signed in.

In his private life there is little to record for his work was his life. On 9th September, 1919 he married 'Che Fatimah binte Ariffin, in his only marriage by which there were six children, three sons and three daughters, all of whom survive him. In 1949 he made the Hadj pilgrimage to Mecca and to other holy places of Arabia.

His death was quite sudden and peaceful on the evening of 7th November, 1958. He came to work as usual, but at midday collapsed and was taken home. There he ate a little, then settled down to sleep, and that was the end.

In botanical history there are many instances of father-son successions. This inheritance of similar interests and abilities would make an interesting genetical study, and here indeed is yet another. For the four years before Mohamed Nur's death his son, Mohamed Shah, had been working as a Plant Collector in the herbarium. During this time Mohamed Shah showed and developed the family trait of an untutored botanical taxonomic acumen. It must have been a satisfaction to the old man that his son was destined to follow his footsteps. Four months after his death Mohamed Shah was confirmed in the post.

Plants named after Mohamed Nur

- Dioscorea nurii* . . Kunth in Engler's Pflanzenreich, IV—43, 1924 (Reduced to *D. kingii* Kunth).
- Begonia nurii* . . Irmischer in Mitt. Inst. Bot. Hamburg 8, 1929.
- Cryptocoryne nurii* . . Furtado in Gardens' Bull. S.S. 8, 1935.
- Daemonorops nurii* . . Furtado in Gardens' Bull. Singapore 14, 1953.
- Ardisia nurii* . . Furtado sp. nov. in this issue.

Mohamed Nur's major plant collecting expeditions

(No record is available of innumerable minor collecting trips and single day forays)

Date	Locality	Accompanying
1913–24 (annually, covering every month of the year except January)	Penang, Port Swettenham, occasionally to Klang	I. H. Burkill or alone
July 1914	Tampin, Negri Sembilan	—
June 1915	Pulau Tinggi, P. Tioman, Johore/Pahang	I. H. Burkill
November 1915	Pulau Terutau, S. Thailand	Md. Haniff
February 1917	Taiping Hill, Perak	Md. Haniff
December 1920	Salak & Sg. Siput, Perak	Md. Haniff
August 1921	Sibolangit, Sumatra East Coast	F. W. Foxworthy J. A. Lorzing
November 1921	P. Langkawi group, Kedah	Md. Haniff
June 1922	Tembeling, G. Tahan (south side) Pahang	Md. Haniff
s.d. 1922	G. Pulau, Johore	Kiah

<i>Date</i>	<i>Locality</i>	<i>Accompanying</i>
Jan./Feb. 1923	Sg. Kelantan, Sg. Labir, Gunung Tahan (north side), Bukit Temangan, Kuala Krai, Kelantan	Md. Haniff
Aug./Sept. 1923	Fraser's Hill, Selangor/Pahang	R. E. Holttum M. R. Henderson
November 1923	Gunong Angsi, Negri Sembilan	F. W. Foxworthy
December 1923	Bt. Tangga, Negri Sembilan	—
December 1923	Sg. Buloh Forest Reserve, Selangor	—
Feb./Mar. 1924	K. Lipis, Gelas Valley, Gua Nineh, G. Strong, Kelantan.	F. W. Foxworthy
November 1924	Serdang, Selangor	Md. Haniff
November 1924	Raub, Kuala Lipis, Pahang	I. H. Burkill & Md. Haniff
February 1926	G. Panti, Johore	R. E. Holttum
Apr./May 1927	P. Tioman, Pahang	M. R. Henderson
Oct./Nov. 1927	Pahang/Kelantan Boundary	M. R. Henderson
December 1927	G. Panti, Johore	R. E. Holttum
March 1928	G. Muntahak, Johore	R. E. Holttum
Aug./Sept. 1928	G. Tahan, Pahang/Kelantan	R. E. Holttum
April 1929	P. Tioman, Johore	M. R. Henderson
July/Aug. 1929	K. Tembeling, Pahang, Kelantan/ Pahang Boundary & Kuantan, Pahang	M. R. Henderson
November 1929	Perlis	M. R. Henderson
April 1930	Cameron Highlands, Pahang	R. E. Holttum
May/June 1930	Ipoh, Grik, Perak	M. R. Henderson
October 1930	Tasek Bera, Pahang	M. R. Henderson & Ngadiman
November 1930	Rhio Islands	—
April 1931	Mentakab, Tembeling, Pahang	R. E. Holttum
May/June 1931	Tembeling, Pahang/Kelantan	M. R. Henderson E. J. H. Corner & Ngadiman
October 1931	Bentong, Kuantan, Pahang	M. R. Henderson
November 1934	P. Langkawi, Kedah	M. R. Henderson
May 1936	Cameron Highlands, Pahang	R. E. Holttum
April 1937	Ringlet, Pahang	—
October 1937	Telok Forest Reserve, Klang Sg. Tinggi Forest Reserve K. Selan- gor, Ginting Simpah and Bt. Kanching, Selangor.	F.M.S. Forest Department collectors.

H.M.B.