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ROUNDTABLE

(Up)rooted Consumptions: Can Plants Speak?

Mika Hyman[1] and Sebastian Kroupa[2]

[1]Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK and
[2]Department of Social Studies of Medicine, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Corresponding author: Mika Hyman; Email: mjh291@cam.ac.uk

In this dialogue, Mika Hyman and Sebastian Kroupa consider how plants operate as dynamic agents shaping historical and cultural processes. Plants offer especially productive sources for cross-contextualization precisely because they refuse confinement to a single context or form of evidence. Their traces range from living organisms and herbarium specimens to traded objects, entries, and images in scientific treatises and motifs in visual and material culture. This multiplicity enables historians to use plants to move across disparate geographies, chronologies, and epistemologies. The apparent rootedness of plants belies their extraordinary mobility: transported as seeds, dried samples, and cultivated crops, plants reveal both global connections and ruptures, moments of transfer as much as dislocation and loss. While plants may not speak to us in a literal sense, their movements, meanings, and material presences open histories that might otherwise remain silent – and that challenge imperial, anthropocentric, and accumulation-driven narratives.

Plants also draw attention to both material and sensory forms of consumption. Eaten, worn, handled, smelled, and observed, they shape human interactions through taste, touch, and aesthetic experience as much as through economic exchange. Since plants live not only as natural entities but also as carriers of meaning, metaphor, and cultural expression, they enable historians to trace movements across different systems of exchange, whether commercial, moral, or symbolic. They reveal how value was produced, assigned, and transformed.

To foreground plants as potent tools of cross-contextualization, Hyman and Kroupa draw on examples ranging from Philippine rice terraces to the ruptures of the Syrian Civil War. Across these contexts, plants unveil fragments of Indigenous knowledge, power, and creativity, alongside epistemological tensions and silences.

Sebastian Kroupa

Mika and I decided to frame our conversation using the following questions: how can cross-contextualization foreground the historical processes through which subaltern agency and knowledge become contested, selectively legible, or illegible, without presuming direct access to subaltern voices or reinscribing dominant

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epistemologies? How can we listen to plants and their historical traces on their own terms?

Historically, the cultural practices surrounding plants – much like the study of Indigenous cultures more broadly – fell into the domain of anthropologists, archaeologists, and biologists, rather than historians. Valuable as these inquiries have been, the historical entanglements of these fields with Western imperial projects of coloniality and extraction have contributed to reinforcing the views of Indigenous plant knowledge as superstitious, static, or timeless.[1] As such, cultural studies of plants may have seemed disconnected from the concerns of historians with change and modernity. New scholarship has sought to redress this legacy by turning to plants as sites where epistemological tensions persist, as methodological tools that reconfigure historical methods and unsettle the authority of dominant archives.[2] In conversation with these approaches, our aim is to show how plants compel historians to rethink the boundaries of historical agency and evidence. Let me focus on three examples from the Philippines, starting in the Cordillera Mountain ranges of northern Luzon: one of the Indigenous heartlands, where communities resisted Spanish colonization for more than 300 years. Among the most striking features in this history of enduring Indigenous sovereignty are the Ifugao rice terraces. Carved into the rugged mountain slopes, the terraces not only protected villages from military incursion, but also generated food surpluses that sustained resistance to domination from outside forces. Rice cultivation also carried a significant gendered dimension, with Filipina women extensively involved in planting and harvesting.

Now listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the terraces and their sophisticated engineering have sparked debates over their age. Earlier generations of anthropologists and archaeologists argued that such extensive terracing could only be the result of thousands of years of Indigenous landscape modifications. The terraces were therefore interpreted as examples of long-term Indigenous persistence and isolation in a region supposedly untouched by colonization (Figure 1).

Recent research has challenged this narrative. Archaeologist Stephen Acabado and his team have shown that the terraces were constructed more recently: between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, when Ifugao became a zone of refuge for lowland communities fleeing Spanish colonization in the neighbouring Cagayan Valley. These findings challenge long-standing discourses of Filipino mountain communities inhabiting pristine Indigenous spaces, separated from their colonized lowland neighbours. Instead, Acabado characterizes Ifugao as a pericolonial space: uncolonized, yet profoundly shaped by the socio-cultural and environmental

[1]Banu Subramaniam, 'Methodologies for the pressed: cartographies for adisciplinary sciences', *Science, Technology and Society*, 28 (2022), pp. 68–76; Raphael Uchôa, "'Savage knowledge", ethnosciences, and the colonial ways of producing reservoirs of Indigenous epistemologies in the Amazon', *Journal of Social Ontology*, 10 (2024), pp. 1–23.

[2]Kathleen Cruz Gutierrez, 'From objects of study to worldmaking beings: the history of botany at the corner of the plant turn', *History Compass*, 21 (2023); Sophie Chao, *In the shadow of the palms: more-than-human becomings in West Papua* (Durham, NC, 2022); Banu Subramaniam, *Botany of empire: plant worlds and the scientific legacies of colonialism* (Seattle, WA, 2024); Anna Tsing, *The mushroom at the end of the world: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins* (Princeton, NJ, 2015).

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Figure 1. Ifugao rice terraces (permission: photograph taken by the author).

upheavals caused by colonialism in the lowlands.[3] Even Spanish imperial agents lamented in their accounts that migration into the highlands offered a viable strategy for Indigenous people seeking to escape empire.[4]

This research has recast Ifugao as a site of Indigenous power, adaptability, and sovereignty, rather than a marginal or peripheral space. Plants feature here as crucial mediators of Indigenous mobility, creativity, and autonomy. Through cross-contextualization of archaeological evidence, Indigenous practices of plant cultivation, and colonial archives, scholars can challenge and rewrite deeply entrenched imperial narratives.

My second example turns to the church of Miag-ao on the Visayan island of Panay. The building is known as a prominent example of the Spanish 'earthquake Baroque' architecture.[5] Built between 1787 and 1797 strategically at the town's highest point, the church is fortified with metre-thick walls and imposing belltowers designed to withstand military raids and environmental disasters, including earthquakes and typhoons. However, its richly ornamented façade suggests an alternative reading as a spiritual rather than a military fortress.[6] Constructed by local artisans, the façade also reveals complex interactions between colonialism, Christianity, and Indigenous cosmologies, brought into view through the lens of plants.

[3]Stephen Acabado, 'The archaeology of pericolonialism: responses of the "unconquered" to Spanish conquest and colonialism in Ifugao, Philippines', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 21 (2017), pp. 1–26.

[4]Stephanie Mawson, 'Escaping empire: Philippine mountains and Indigenous histories of resistance', *American Historical Review*, 128 (2023), pp. 1211–43.

[5]Gauvin Alexander Bailey has cautioned that uncritical use of terms such as 'Baroque' in global contexts obscures the particularities of the local context and introduces anachronistic assumptions. Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art on the Jesuit missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773* (Toronto, 1999), p. 26.

[6]Raquel Reyes, 'Paradise in stone: representations of New World plants and animals on Spanish colonial churches in the Philippines', in Raquel Reyes, ed., *Art, trade, and cultural mediation in Asia, 1600–1950* (London, 2018), pp. 43–74.

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Figure 2. The façade of the church of Miag-ao (permission: Wikimedia).

At the centre, St Christopher appears carrying the Christ child: a motif associated with the global expansion of Christianity. Yet in Miag-ao, St Christopher is reimagined as an Indigenous man dressed in local attire. He is not wading through water but planting a coconut palm. This tree operates here on multiple symbolic levels. It stands for the Christian Tree of Life as a metaphor for planting faith in new soil. But the choice of coconut palm was rooted in Indigenous economies and cosmologies. The tree sustained communities with food, tools, and shelter, and figured prominently in Indigenous origin stories. Jesuit missionary accounts describe the Visayan belief that the first man and woman had emerged from two coconuts brought by the ocean.[7] In the façade, Christian and Indigenous cosmologies intertwined in new, creative ways (Figure 2).

These layered meanings raise the question of Indigenous agency that remains difficult to resolve. Philippine historians have long turned to colonial architecture in search of traces of Indigenous agency embedded within the material fabric of empire.[8] Yet the evidence preserved in colonial archives remains fragmentary and often contradictory. Church construction has been framed as keen Indigenous participation in spiritual service and as coercive extraction of labour that provoked

[7]Francisco Ignacio Alcina, *History of the Bisayan people in the Philippine Islands: evangelization and culture at the contact period – Historia de Las Islas e Indios de Bisayas...1668*, ed. Cantius Koback and Lucio Gutiérrez, I (Manila, 2002), p. 317.

[8]Benito J. Legarda Jr, 'Colonial churches of Ilocos', *Philippine Studies*, 8 (1960), pp. 121–58; Benito J. Legarda Jr, 'Angels in clay: the typical Cagayan church style', *Filipinas Journal of Science and Culture*, 2 (1981), pp. 69–81; René Javellana, *Wood and stone for God's greater glory: Jesuit art and architecture in the Philippines* (Manila, 1991).

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resistance and fugitivism.[9] We may interpret the Miag-ao façade as strategic missionary accommodation to facilitate the local reception of Christian doctrines – or perhaps as evidence of Indigenous creativity and cultural resilience. Our sources reveal less about the extent of missionary direction or Indigenous power over representation than about the limits of colonial records.

Cross-contextualization expands the range of historical questions while sharpening our awareness of the limits of historical evidence. One such comparison that helps us broaden the interpretative scope is Jeanette Favrot Peterson's study of the Augustinian monastery murals at Malinalco, Mexico. Peterson has argued that by incorporating local cosmological features, Indigenous artists worked to undermine the orthodoxy of the Christian message.[10] Yet unlike Malinalco, the Miag-ao façade was not designed for the eyes of missionaries within monastic walls, but directed outwards, to Indigenous Filipinos. As they gathered for mass, did they gaze upon the monumental palm tree as more than just a Christian symbol – one that quietly affirmed the resilience and creativity of their own culture within the very fabrics of colonial religion?

Whether we read the façade for missionary accommodation, Indigenous subversion, or something in between, recognition of this ambiguity is perhaps more historically significant than definitive answers. The coconut palm does not provide clear access to Indigenous intentions. Rather, cross-contextualization brings into view the asymmetrical processes through which colonial and Indigenous cosmologies were negotiated, contested, and, at times, erased. What remains are fragmentary traces that resist definitive interpretation and thus demand attentiveness to absence as much as presence.

The final example also centres on coconuts. Communities across the early modern Philippines held that, on rare occasions, coconuts contained white concretions called 'mutya' in Tagalog, Bikol, and Visayan languages. These 'coconut stones' were attributed supernatural powers as lucky charms that offered protection in battle and warded off disease. Present-day ethnographies portray mutya as potent amulets that grant special abilities, from speed and strength to healing.[11]

The stones' magical qualities drew the scrutiny of early modern missionaries wary of objects that might challenge Catholic authority. As part of their project to convert both Indigenous souls and natures, missionaries stripped mutya of its spiritual significance and reduced it to an object of mere economic value. In their dictionaries of Filipino languages, the complex category of mutya became simply precious stones and pearls. In the Philippines today, mutya most often denotes a precious person or object. It is perhaps most closely associated with the beauty pageant Mutya ng Pilipinas: a commercialized event which claims to celebrate Filipino identity but arguably objectifies women's bodies. While Catholic missionaries could hardly have expected this turn of events, their efforts to transform mutya from a

[9]Regalado Trota José, *Simbahan: church art in colonial Philippines, 1565–1898* (Manila, 1991); Linda Newson, *Conquest and pestilence in the early Spanish Philippines* (Honolulu, 2009).

[10]Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *The Paradise Garden murals of Malinalco: utopia and empire in sixteenth-century Mexico* (Austin, TX, 1993).

[11]Ulysses Aparece and Fernando Talaugon, 'Becoming a shaman in northern Bohol', *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*, 35 (2007), pp. 278–308.

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spiritual concept into one connected with consumerism seems to have succeeded in its own particular way.[12]

The Jesuits were uneasy with objects like mutya precisely because – much like Indigenous Filipino communities – they too operated within a relational cosmology, in which plants mediated between human, natural, and spiritual worlds. This cosmological contest took a very different turn for another potent Indigenous amulet: the seeds of the shrub known as igasud in the Visayas. The Jesuits reforged igasud into a powerful medicinal drug and commodified it globally as the beans of St Ignatius. As such, they reinscribed the seeds' virtues from Indigenous cosmologies into the authority of the Jesuit patron saint.[13] The divergent fortunes of mutya and igasud enable us to foreground Indigenous plant practices as epistemologically coherent systems for understanding the natural world. Rather than rational European science confronting Indigenous superstition, the colonial encounter unveils here a struggle between rival cosmologies. Imperial violence lay not only in the confrontation alone, but in the selective suppression of particular worldviews.

Mika Hyman

Sebestian has clearly outlined some of the questions, challenges, and opportunities raised by working closely with plants. Drawing on examples from my own research, I would like to extend the focus on consumption.

Consumption refers to more than an economic act. As Sebestian's discussion of the church of Miag-ao illustrated, a single source can sustain several layers of it. The coconut functions as both food and image: it is visually consumed by the worshipper and historian. These layered forms of consumption – symbolic, archival, and sensory – are part of what makes plants such fascinating historical sources, especially when using cross-contextualization as a methodological approach. They are also part of what makes the question of who or what is speaking so challenging to resolve.

Much of my doctoral research centres on *Theobroma cacao*, a plant best known for being the key ingredient in chocolate. It is also a plant whose history makes layers of consumption unusually visible. Marcy Norton's work on early modern chocolate has advocated for the ways in which Indigenous practices and knowledge informed colonial preparations and consumption through close reading of texts such as the *Florentine Codex*.[14] Meanwhile, the archaeologist Kathryn Sampeck has used similar sources to develop focused studies of Mesoamerican consumption practices, and her ongoing research employs archaeological techniques to investigate cacao

[12]Sebestian Kroupa, *Drugs on the move: the (un)making of transcultural knowledge in Southeast Asia, c. 1680–1720* (monograph, in progress).

[13]Sebestian Kroupa, 'Galenic bodies and Jesuit beans: consuming drugs in Manila at the turn of the eighteenth century', in Justin Rivest and Emma Spary, eds., *Exoticizing consumption: European drug cultures, 1670–1740* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2025), pp. 57–84.

[14]Marcy Norton, 'Tasting empire: chocolate and the European internalization of Mesoamerican aesthetics', *American Historical Review*, 111 (2006), pp. 660–91; Marcy Norton, *Sacred gifts, profane pleasures: a history of tobacco and chocolate in the Atlantic world* (Ithaca, NY, 2010).

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residues and materials.[15] These scholars' approaches and sources have informed my use of cross-contextualization, through which I seek to trace how cacao knowledge evolved and persisted through the structures of colonialism into practices that the conventional archive records only partially, if at all.

When I first began researching cacao, I encountered references to the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred narrative of the K'iche' people. To simply call it a text is misleading: it exists in several forms including transcriptions, for example by the eighteenth-century Dominican priest Francisco Ximénez, and depictions of scenes on surviving pottery.[16]

A little over a year ago, I re-encountered this work while conducting oral history research in Belize. One of the interviewees, Martin Ack, had started a small chocolate-making business named Junjapu or Hunahpú, inspired by the name of one of the hero twins in the *Popol Vuh*. While we were tasting his delicious chocolate – and here I want to briefly acknowledge this moment of sensory engagement, because tasting is a form of consumption that can collapse the distance between historian and source in ways that other methods might not always enable – Martin narrated the story in which Junjapu and his twin undergo a set of trials to resurrect their father, whose head had been hung as a pod on a cacao tree. They succeed, and their father is revived as a corn god. Interpretations of this story often emphasize cacao's life-giving properties, and this certainly is one aspect of it. But as Martin revealed, it might inform contemporary attitudes towards hybridity, intercropping, and interspecies interactions, shaping practices of cultivation as well as consumption. As he observed, it is no accident that the cacao tree is represented as a source of regeneration: as a perennial tree, it does not bear pods for several years, its temporality extending beyond that of annual crops. The regenerative symbolism is not merely metaphorical but can be actively cultivated. So, we learn, cacao is not simply a commodity or a ritual object, but a nexus of mythology, language, sensations, and agricultural practices.

These examples foreground the complex temporalities we navigate – a recurring theme in discussions of cross-contextualization. What does it mean to access ancient knowledge of cacao and botany through oral histories? How do these temporalities shape our understanding of whose knowledge is being transmitted, and through what filters?

Such examples from oral history raise a question about the institutions through which historians often engage with plants as sources – for example, in herbaria and natural history collections. These specimens and their communicative properties have increasingly been used by scholars engaging with 'the plant turn' – a move towards taking plants seriously as historical actors. Historians such as Kathleen Gutierrez and Elaine Ayers have presented compelling cases for the worldmaking capacities of plants, while a recent volume, *Dark botany*, has also advocated for

[15]Kathryn E. Sampeck and Stacey Schwartzkopf, *Substance and seduction: ingested commodities in early modern Mesoamerica* (Austin, TX, 2017); Kathryn Sampeck, 'A constitutional approach to cacao money', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 61 (2021).

[16]Francisco Ximénez, *Empiezan las historias del origen de los indios de esta provincia de Guatemala* (c. 1701–3).

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counter narratives that emphasize their interdependency.[17] The debates raised by scholars engaging with the 'plant turn' were central to Sebestian's and my interest in the question of whether plants can speak. It encouraged us to consider the question: in insisting that plants speak, what do we risk overlooking? And how does that risk shape the way in which we use cross-contextualization in herbarium spaces specifically?

The first specimens I encountered in the Cambridge University Herbarium were part of the project 'Digitising Philippine Flora', and their sparseness was forbidding. A specimen pasted onto a sheet with hardly any contextualizing information: only the name of the collector – Hugh Cuming, who was English – and the country of collection – the Philippines. To begin to understand this plant, I needed to cross-contextualize it with other specimens in this herbarium, alongside information from correspondence and documents. It is more than likely that Cuming did not collect this plant himself, but instead relied on local actors to extract hundreds of thousands of plants from their environments. Their names do not appear on these specimens. The herbarium sheet records a form of imperial consumption while obscuring the knowledge and labour that made it possible. Although the plant begins to 'speak' once identified and situated among its ecological neighbours, it is essential not to overlook what is absent.

Not all local gatherers were as invisible as those in Cuming's collection. Nineteenth-century specimens collected for Sir George King, the superintendent of the Calcutta Botanic Garden, list a local figure named Dungboo as the collector. He seems to have been employed as a field collector in Bhutan during the 1870s and 1880s. Many of his specimens are now housed in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and I have recently located some in the Cambridge University Herbarium. Two poppies – *Meconopsis primulina* and *Meconopsis superba* – are particularly important. Dungboo is credited as being the first person to collect these, and they have since become celebrated in Bhutanese culture as national flowers and also have become a common presence in English gardens. At first glance, the presence of Dungboo's name on the specimen sheets, and the pencilled Dzongkha script, seems to offer an unusually direct window into the role and knowledge of these local collectors. Yet the herbarium sheet tells us little of the plants' earlier significance in Bhutan. Moreover, the materiality of the specimens – the European paper, the mounting practices of imperial collections – shapes their meaning as much as the plants themselves. Dungboo's specimens initially seem to offer more than Cuming's – a name, a script, a location – and yet the knowledge those traces imply stretches beyond the archive's immediate reach. Partial visibility can be as difficult to interpret as silence.

My final example turns to an artist who has taken the herbarium as a provocation. The Cambridge-based artist Issam Kourbaj has recently been exploring herbaria and we met during a specimen-mounting workshop at the Cambridge University Herbarium. In a 2024 exhibition, *Urgent Archive*, he burned Syrian wheat seeds from

[17]Elaine Ayers, 'Strange beauty: botanical collecting, preservation, and display in the nineteenth century tropics' (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton, 2019); Gutierrez, 'From objects of study to worldmaking beings'; Anna Westbrook, Prudence Gibson, and Sigi Jöttkandt, eds., *Dark botany: the herbarium tales* (London, 2024).

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food security collections before taking and printing magnified and enlarged photographs of them.[18] By burning these seeds, Issam sought to communicate the war that has prevented the wheat from being consumed in an ordinary sense – from being grown, eaten, and sustained in its natural, Syrian environments. As part of the same exhibition, he also planted some of the Syrian seeds in the back garden of the museum, Kettle's Yard. However, partly due to climate, the wheat hardly grew and all that now remains are plant fragments. By now mounting these fragments in the style of herbaria, Issam is reimagining the herbarium as an artistic practice, interrogating its traditions and making plants speak in new ways, while remaining accountable to what they cannot say.

Joint statement

Can plants speak? As we suggest, plants are far from passive and inert objects: they are cultural and historical actors who speak to pressing questions of colonial dominance but also Indigenous sovereignty, resilience, and creativity. Yet there are limits to cross-contextualization. If we deploy Indigenous cosmologies primarily to deconstruct colonial epistemologies, rather than engaging with them on their own terms, do we risk reinscribing imperial power dynamics under the guise of critical analysis? There are also persistent challenges of anachronism, as anthropology, archaeology, history, and Indigenous cosmologies and oral histories all operate on different temporal scales – sometimes even with entirely different conceptions of time. As one of us has argued elsewhere, understanding the Indigenous Filipino practice of tattooing as a form of embodied history exposes temporality itself as a site of colonial contestation.[19] These tensions remind us that reading across different forms of historical evidence and contexts is not a simple matter of comparison or translation. Instead, we suggest that cross-contextualization invites us to embrace the messy complexity of colonial encounter and acknowledge that our accounts may remain fragmentary, shaped as much by absence as by presence.

Julie Cruikshank's work proves especially valuable here by reminding us that natural entities not only speak but also listen.[20] So, can we listen, rather than speak for? Speaking for involves interpreting or articulating the voice of another – often an agent silenced within dominant records. But does this action risk flattening power relations and reinscribing epistemic violence? Listening, by contrast, opens space for ambiguity, silence, and incompleteness.[21] If we listen, can we resist the urge to make a historical actor speak in familiar terms? Can we engage with accounts of plant agency and cosmologies not simply to give voice to them, but to let them resist assimilation into dominant cultural or historical frameworks? Perhaps this is

[18] *Issam Kourbaj: Urgent Archive,* Kettle's Yard, www.kettlesyard.cam.ac.uk/whats-on/issam-kourbaj-urgent-archive/.

[19] Sebestian Kroupa, 'Reading beneath the skin: Indigenous tattooing in the early Spanish Philippines, c. 1520–1720', *American Historical Review*, 127 (2022), pp. 1252–87.

[20] Julie Cruikshank, *Do glaciers listen? Local knowledge, colonial encounters, and social imagination* (Vancouver, 2007).

[21] For silence in history, see Martin Dusinberre, 'Japan, global history, and the great silence', *History Workshop Journal*, 83 (2017), pp. 130–50.

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one of the key strengths of cross-contextualization: rather than yielding neat narratives and syntheses, it cultivates discomfort. By challenging and disrupting our own frameworks, cross-contextualization attunes us to their limits and sharpens our ability to listen.

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