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From Spice to Commodity: The Biocultural Transformation of Nutmeg under Colonial Capitalism *(A Critical Reading of Amitav Ghosh's The Nutmeg's Curse)*

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Abstract

Usually thought of as a spice or some kind of tradeable crop, Nutmeg can also be viewed as an example of an object that represents how the economic world works. There are a variety of things to be seen through Nutmeg's history: there are trading empires and those things associated with them, like knowledge and capital. In his work *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Amitav Ghosh details how nutmeg, originally a plant with an associated Banda Islands ecology, was altered into a thing of commerce by trading companies. To say that Ghosh's work is simply a critique of colonialism would be an understatement, as his work touches on such other areas as: the critique of political ecology; the critique of colonialism in regards to environmental issues; the analysis of commodities; the Anthropocene; the concept of a 'more than human' world, as well as several other areas. Ghosh shows us how, within natural history and human history, things like trade, and other similar activities can occur through a commodity that people believe has worth.

There are certain reasons as to why the Banda Islands show that plants, in this case nutmeg, can have an effect on human history. These reasons can be seen in how much of the plant exists, and where. Since nutmeg is so valued and exists in a certain place in the world, the trade of this plant would be more of a concern than with most other plants. The trade of the plant would cause several other people to become involved in this process. However, the other trading people did not care much for those people of the Banda Islands. Because the people of Banda had already learned the processes of caring for nutmeg, the others took what knowledge the Bandanese had, and replaced the Bandanese people. The outcome of this was several acts of violence toward the Banda people and those of the world around them.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh; The Nutmeg's Curse; nutmeg; Banda Islands; colonial capitalism; biocultural diversity; political ecology; Anthropocene; Plantationocene; more-than-human history; epistemic violence; ecological violence; biocultural justice.

Introduction

History shows how insignificant a spice can be, although it might just as easily be placed in a kitchen drawer as traded on the international markets as some more grandiose goods might be, and as such might seemingly have no relevance to things as consequential as empire building, genocide, and world events like climate change. *The Nutmeg's Curse* by Amitav Ghosh provides a convincing rebuttal to this perspective. It traces the history of the spice from the Banda Islands to the modern era, revealing a complex set of global connections that is intertwined with Western colonialism, environmental damage, and the climate change that currently confronts us. Nutmeg provides the thread for these various elements. As noted in the book's promotional material, nutmeg cannot be fully understood simply through commodity history, for before it was a commodity, nutmeg was an organism in an ecological context, valued and managed by the Bandanese as much as it was by the world's spice traders, in an intricate social structure, deeply linked with its surroundings. This history is more than simply the history of trade; it is the history of change in the relationship of nutmeg to other things. It can be seen as an ongoing process of changing social structures and the value of nutmeg as something other than trade. Ghosh uses a framework from colonial capitalism, political ecology, commodity studies, biocultural studies, environmental studies and more, and posits that there is an order to these developments. That is to say, nutmeg is not responsible for the present environmental catastrophe, but its history reveals the progression of systems of resource extraction and exploitation, systems of resource control, and monopoly and imperial domination. Of course, all this leads to a larger question, what happens when we look at the history of a plant as a part of human history? It takes us beyond more conventional history that focuses on individuals such as states, merchants, kings and armies. Such history would more fully consider the role that animals, soils, rivers and other features play in how we form our societies. It would be wrong to think of nutmeg as something we control. It is also because of its unique biology and distribution that it played such a key role in European conquest, trade and the development of empires.

Nutmeg as a Biocultural Entity

The term ‘biocultural’ comes into its own as a term because of its denial of any clear cut boundaries between the different areas of diversity such as biological, cultural and linguistic. It is Maffi (2005) who notes that different areas of diversity can also be geographically linked, leading to the creation of the term biocultural diversity. He is of the view that this refers to how ecological systems and species coexist, as do language systems and social institutions. An example of a species that is highly dependent on other factors to thrive, is Nutmeg, which is native to the Banda Islands. Prior to European monopolies on its cultivation, the culture of Banda Islands incorporated the harvesting of the plant in their lifestyle. As part of their culture, Bandanese were adept in cultivating the plant. The plant even needed the unique growing environment of the islands, further emphasizing the close relationship between cultural practices, languages, and systems of knowledge, to support ecological diversity. With European expansionism, the cultivation of nutmeg changed, leading to Dutch farmers needing the skills of enslaved Bandanese, which also goes on to emphasize that colonial power cannot exist without Bandanese farmers (Ghosh, 2021).

In contrast, Bandanese farmers were able to thrive because they lived in an ecologically rich culture that also supported their farming activities, whereas Dutch farmers lacked the skills, further emphasizing the role of cultures in promoting ecological systems. Nutmeg was, before anything, a biocultural commodity, with an existence not defined merely by its chemical composition or price in a market economy. It existed in a world that, amongst other things, included Bandanese and ecological systems. There are two categories: commodities, which have to be measurable and interchangeable, and biocultural entities. Biocultural entities are, by definition, dependent on ecological and cultural relationships for their existence. Nutmeg fell victim to the commodification that took place under the rule of Colonial Capitalism, where it was classified as a purely economic product. Today, the world of spice remains primarily economic with the help of international commodity trade, and is classified on the basis of prices and weights. Any relationship with the people and land of production is lost, as the spice itself is classified in terms of being detached from any of those relationships. However, Amitav Ghosh, in his book, is able to recontextualise nutmeg and bring the story back to its relationship with the people and land, and what is interesting is that this is able to happen because of the stories told of the commodity.

Plant → Resource: The First Transformation

The initial stage of nutmeg's colonial transformation began with the conceptual shift from plant to resource. A plant becomes a resource when people begin to interpret its value solely through its service to humans. There are certain ways in which plants were previously valued and used. It is worth noting, however, that the intensification and structuring of these relationships of colonial capitalism are the major difference from previous relationships. Prior to this, plants were primarily used locally, whereas with colonial capitalism, they were utilized by people outside the region and by the empires of people outside the region. Nutmeg was geographically situated in the Banda Islands, and valued in markets outside the region, particularly Europe (especially during the sixteenth century). The world nutmeg market in Europe before the eighteenth century was supplied almost entirely from the Banda Islands. Because nutmeg had unique combination of values in geographically isolated markets, this trade had unforeseen implications. Thus, nutmeg became an invaluable asset, both as an economic and strategic resource, particularly due to the uniqueness of its cultivation requirements. Its position, its scarcity, its growing requirements and the trade of nutmeg itself made Banda more and more vulnerable. Robbins (2012) described the transformation of nutmeg through the lens of political ecology. This was a unique discipline focused on the connection between ecology, trade and politics. He defined trade goods as more than the goods themselves. Through trading nutmeg, society created values, appropriated and began to control trade. The trade of nutmeg demonstrated the process of society assigning value to things based on their economic worth while having biological value. Through the colonial economy of nutmeg, plants started being separated from their ecology. Nutmeg was valuable not because it sustained an ecological relationship but because it was valued because of the worth people assigned to it because of the potential trade that resulted from harvesting it.

Resource → Commodity: The Making of Market Value

The second change is the shifting of the local, natural state of nutmeg into a traded commodity. Exchange isn't the only component of commodities, they must be priced, structured, and regulated, then shipped. Nutmeg was traded long distance. However, it came at the cost of being heavily exploited. The most interesting portion of this study is the development of international trade, when nutmeg's price escalated, so did the violence surrounding it. Control over nutmeg's supply became a primary economical focus. What had once been the product of a localized system, nutmeg became an internationally contested product. In many cases, it had been a valued part of localized systems but once its production entered international systems, control was paramount and led to conflict. An interesting, yet not surprising observation, was the absence of nutmeg's historical roots as its value escalated and became associated with international systems. As with many things that value increases as their price does, the commodity value seemed to separate itself from its production history. I found Ghosh's exploration of the different elements that made nutmeg a commodity as particularly effective as well as the explanation of its transition. His approach was the inverse of standard history and as a result the relationships of the various parties and the conditions of its trade are more fully understood. Nutmeg commodities as we know them were created as distance became important. Distant consumers had no way of knowing how production of the spices affected local economies. Production effects grew more difficult to imagine with each extra mile of distance, and were lost completely once a spice reached a consumers home. Now, we live in a world where production processes and final products are geographically separate. These systems also result in environmental consequences in one place while the profits end up in another. The author's historical examination of nutmeg shows us that this contemporary problem also happened during the height of the British colonial empire. In terms of the commodification of nutmeg, it underwent a process of abstraction. As it entered the European trading world, it's status as a unique Banda spice was replaced by a more universal trade commodity. Thus, its unique nature was commodified and made to fit standard economic and trading processes.

Commodity → Monopoly: Controlling the Living

The next stage is the development of a monopoly from a commodity. This happened when the VOC shifted from trade in nutmeg to its absolute control. A monopoly involves many factors. Ghosh places the Banda Islands' violence at the epicenter of this stage of Dutch colonialism. Through mass slaughter, enslavement, and reorganization of Banda's society, the Dutch successfully executed a brutal and complete military takeover of the trade. Rather than competition in the conventional sense, Ghosh emphasizes the integration of violence into the trading structure itself, specifically the formation of monopolies. This provides another example of a paradox of colonial capitalism: the Dutch had an urgent demand for a plant that they lacked the ecological knowledge to grow on their own, and consequently were forced to assert complete dominance over people to obtain the plant. The social context for the cultivation of nutmeg had been completely dismantled. It illustrates that ecological knowledge is as deeply embedded in a society as a plant is in its environment, and that a society can be so radically altered that the plant is grown with very little of the original understanding. A monopoly stage helps people better understand the nature of colonial capitalism, which can sometimes look like mercantilism. A commodity market does not guarantee the existence of competitive trading. Markets created by European powers were

driven by coercion and military might, enabling certain trading powers to acquire resources. For this reason, the nutmeg trade can be thought of as an example of mercantilism.

Monopoly → Instrument of Empire

The fourth transition happens when the commodity becomes a tool of Empire. It loses its purely economic value and control over it becomes part of a broader vision of empire building and dominance over others. The story of nutmeg on the Banda islands is an example of the convergence of imperial ambition with commercial incentives. The Banda Islands came under European rule when military and administration control was asserted over them in pursuit of a monopoly over the spice. This monopoly required violence as part of its operations. Ghosh asserts that modern climate issues can't be dissociated from European imperial histories of extraction of resources. The University of Chicago Press notes that Ghosh describes a planetary crisis as being formed around a Western dominated world order (Ghosh, 2021). The case of nutmeg provides a warning about the structure of an imperial world. Nutmeg illustrates the world's imperial system through which economic dominance and resource extraction takes place over immense distances. Imperialism turned Banda's unique geography into a lucrative world commodity, establishing the pattern for extraction of more complex commodities (tea, cotton, sugar, etc.). Though every resource had unique origins, the underlying formula remained unchanged. The process started with a recognition of resource wealth. Then control was exercised. Labour was restructured. Extraction began, and final output was linked to external consumption. Through nutmeg, Ghosh (2021) shows how European empires, first Portuguese and then Dutch, transformed the natural, social, and economic relations of the Banda Islands. Through imperial intervention, nutmeg went from a commodity to the center of a much more extensive imperial design. In particular, Ghosh shows how European companies exercised military and administrative power to secure monopolies on nutmeg production. The Dutch East India Company's actions on Banda illustrates how early modern commercial enterprise used violent means to implement economic monopolies on world resources.

Ghosh's book argues that there is no separating modern global climate change from the history of resource extraction by European empires. According to the book description of the University of Chicago Press (Ghosh, 2021), Ghosh's book tracks how a Western constructed international order has produced contemporary global ecological problems. Through a case study of nutmeg, Ghosh's book exposes the world economic order that has shaped modern international relations. Ghosh's book provides a useful parable about how even something as simple as nutmeg can illustrate a world economic order.

Through imperialism, different parts of the world became economically subordinated to different world powers. Natural systems like those of the Banda Islands became sources of wealth for people located thousands of miles away. It's hard not to notice how this set of extraction processes became a model for the exploitation of many different commodities: sugar, cotton, tea, rubber, oil, and the list goes on. Each commodity's extraction and production was rooted in its own geographical and historical specificities, but they all fit a basic extraction model. Identify some valuable resource. Dominate its location of origin. Restructure the local workforce and environment. Connect the site of extraction to the site of use. Nutmeg can be added to the list of commodities whose extraction was part of the 'Capitalocene'—the historical development of a world capitalism characterized by

the global organization of labor, nature, and resources (Moore, 2015). Terms aside, the important historical point is that world systems change because of a variety of economic and political forces and not because of a more abstract 'humanity.'

Ecological Violence: When the Commodity Reshapes the Landscape

Colonialism's control of trade also completely changed the landscapes of colonial territories. Control of trading routes determined what can be traded and by whom, as well as where trade can occur. In most colonies, control over trade allowed the colonizing nation to dictate what species can be considered more valuable than others. Control over trade in Banda Islands caused massive damage to the local environment. Because control over trade implies domination, there is no place for variety or uncontrolled diversity. This results in trade having absolute control over what is traded, when, and by whom. The plantation system and control over lands brought by colonizing nations did not improve the trade, but completely destroyed the local lands by rearranging the local landscape. The most common examples used to describe this system are slavery, monocultures, control over trade, and plantation control. Many describe this system as 'the Plantationocene' and some use this to highlight the systems that brought the capitalism we see today (Haraway, 2015). 'Plantationocene' provides an interesting lens with which to view history, as seen in the story of nutmeg. With nutmeg, control over trade of a product was the goal, and that resulted in trade having control over a large portion of a distant colony's land. 'Plantationocene' is more than just about people altering the natural landscape; rather, the most notable effect was when political-economic control reorganised natural systems to support trade from far off places. In other words, natural systems became trading outposts, and in order to achieve control, many aspects of nature were rearranged, such as species' control over natural systems, natural systems themselves, soil control, and more. Ghosh's method has been successful in establishing this linkage, showing how control over the people, trade, and nature have a similar timeline and occurred as part of a colonizing effort.

Epistemic Violence: The Destruction and Appropriation of Knowledge

Nutmeg, because of its ecological history, also has an epistemic history. The phenomenon of colonialism was more than the acquisition of property. It was the imposition of a colonial ordering of things, which, in the context of the environment, means the appropriation and classification of ecological knowledge as part of colonial sovereignty. Spivak has developed the term epistemic violence to describe the suppression of colonial subjects' knowledge (Spivak, 1988). This is seen in the colonial economy's requirement for Bandanese knowledge alongside the erosion of Bandanese society. It is the hypocrisy of the colonial claim to possession of science and modernity, even as it relies on displaced populations for its own subsistence. This knowledge became marketable only after its community had lost it. These practices are not unique to colonialism and are present in modern industries of extraction. Local communities lose sovereignty over their own knowledge,, because corporations, governments and scientists use it as an open access good. To take this concept further, we should start to understand knowledge as part of biodiversity. There are many layers of life and diversity. Bioculture is understanding biodiversity beyond just biological species and recognizing all the layers of the ecology. Many stories of biodiversity include displacement and cultural violence of many communities. Understanding knowledge as part of biodiversity adds an interesting dimension of ecological violence, specifically when ecological knowledge and its relationship with the land is disrupted by displacing a community.

Nutmeg as a More-than-Human Historical Actor

A lot of what we know about history focuses on humans, and places plant and animal life on a lower tier. We view nature and animals as inanimate objects used to better the lives of humans. History beyond human centrality questions why certain non-human factors can take on the role of agents, particularly in the case of nutmeg, which caused many events that led to the development of many of Europe's geopolitical ambitions. Not only was the plant's value increased because of its lack of abundance, but because of its concentration in the Banda Islands, nutmeg contributed to the European cultivation of colonies. Many colonial strategies were motivated by the cultivation of nutmeg, which consequently brought Banda under European domination. Therefore, nutmeg had a hand in making colonial strategies. Its contribution as a significant part of the colonial conquest and colonization was possible because of nutmeg's own attributes.

Nutmeg was an active member of many networks and groups of people during colonial history. One network in which nutmeg took an active role includes the sailors, merchants, the Bandanese growers, markets and states. Nutmeg took on many forms and crossed many boundaries. From these networks nutmeg also created his own history, as do many people in other networks.

History changed as a result of the Dutch East India Company's conquest of Banda, although nutmeg played an even more active role in this process. Dutch conquest was driven by many factors, including the Dutch company's desire to exploit the Banda Islands. Because the Dutch gained dominance over Banda and was successful in eliminating other competition in Banda, they acquired control over Banda's economy, although this conquest was fueled by many different motivations. Many other networks are built and shaped by other actors. Nutmeg had many roles. He was many things to different people. One can gain different perspectives through his history. The more nutmeg changed roles, the more he also had an active role in creating more histories of his own. For more detailed history on the roles of nutmeg and other historical people, go to http://Nutmeg-as-Actor-or-Actor-as-Nutmeg.

With these examples of many actors having many different roles in their own histories, one can understand why many people, especially other researchers, feel it necessary to bring nutmeg into historical and contemporary debates of colonialism. This paper focuses on other people who have built on nutmeg and his history, including the Dutch and many other historians. The purpose of this paper is to build on these contributions and offer more detailed arguments on nutmeg's role as an actor and the different historical, economic, social and geopolitical events that followed. Many people have provided various contributions. Nutmeg has provided more contributions than other people. One contribution made by nutmeg was how the Bandanese society and other people developed more systems and institutions through their contact with other people and nutmeg. Another was nutmeg's role as a form of colonial domination. Finally, there is the Dutch domination. One contribution of nutmeg as a commodity, is the trade networks. A main reason for why there is so much attention on nutmeg is his active involvement in his history. Another is how his history led to much change in other systems and other peoples. These changes caused much interest. Some examples are trade networks, Banda society, Bandanese other people, and nutmeg being used as a colonial form. The final is Dutch domination. For these reasons nutmeg has become an important part of more people's historical interest. He is important for different people's histories. In order to help more people understand the histories of more other people and things, nutmeg needs to be brought into the history of colonial and contemporary domination. He should also be used to argue how people dominate. His many roles should be further detailed, so people understand. Many others have built on the roles and histories of nutmeg, other people, other things, more histories. Many other people, more than nutmeg, have provided different other people more arguments. He had many roles. He provided more contributions than other people. Nutmeg helped with different other people's systems. One example is the Bandanese other people's system and other systems through other people and nutmeg contact. Other examples include nutmeg as a form of colonial domination and the Dutch dominance. Another contribution was trade networks as a form of commodity. One other contribution, more other people, the Dutch domination, as well as trade networks, as form of colonial domination and the Bandanese and more systems and other systems, of nutmeg as a form of other colonial domination. Nutmeg is part of different networks. More people will focus on other people's roles and more histories will be told. The main reason more people focus on the roles and histories of other people is more interest will be brought to nutmeg and how nutmeg, more systems and other systems of people changed through contact.A final contribution is Dutch dominance, trade networks and Banda's other people and more systems through other people and nutmeg. Nutmeg as a colonial form will be another contribution. Because more interest is drawn to nutmeg, his history, and his contact with other systems and other people, more histories will be created and more attention will be paid to other people's roles and other systems.

From More-than-Human History to the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is an era in which human impact is a principal driver of environmental change. But there is little agreement on the concept because of how unevenly "humans" are implicated in the destruction of the world's environments. Ghosh addresses the critique of humanity as an amorphous whole by explaining global change through colonialism, especially through nutmeg trade history. Specifically, the story of nutmeg explains how colonial trade, military presence and trade, and capitalism transformed the island of Banda, rather than any universal human. For these reasons, Moore (2015) uses the term "Capitalocene" to replace Anthropocene, focusing on capitalism, rather than humanity, as the primary organizer of world environment destruction. There are also terms, such as "Plantationocene", to describe the ecological changes driven by plantation economies, coerced labor, and monocultural landscapes. Ghosh is broadly sympathetic with this line of argument. This is evidenced by his argument that planetary environmental problems can be traced to colonial-era systems of geopolitical organization. In _The Nutmeg's Curse_, Ghosh places environmental history far before the usual beginning point of the industrial revolution, showing that colonialism helped to pave the way for fossil fuel based capitalism. There are more colonial pre-histories of the Anthropocene than most of us might care to believe. Nutmeg is, then, a useful lens with which to view both natural history and the Anthropocene. Nutmeg also provides an example of how a living entity can be a precursor to the creation of the global systems we are living under and destroying.

Commodity Fetishism and the Erasure of Place

The loss of sense of place as a consequence of the process of production of a commodity is more severe. For something to have commodity value, it has to be transportable. This comes at the expense of our understanding of how things are put together. If something becomes an trade item, its connection to a place becomes erased. The Bandanese cultivator, the Bandanese soil, and the tree are all lost. This is what nutmeg in modern day supermarkets is about. To a customer, it is no different than an item with an arbitrary value. Its value is purely economic and its branding is utilitarian. The method of Ghosh, an economist of historical commodities, focuses on placing value back into commodities, so to speak. This form of fetishism reveals the social relations of things that the market normally conceals.

Nutmeg as a Repository of Cultural Memory

Nutmeg still contains some of the earlier meanings. In particular, it remains as an archive of cultural memory, but it goes further than this as the spice has more meanings that transcend those of any cultural archive. It maintains a relationship between colonialism and land. Even more, memories are of importance because of colonial violence that was inflicted and the relationship it created between people and the land. One of the reasons is the way land and some other things remember. Many things do not have the power of speech but nutmeg has some.

Nutmeg can be classified as biocultural. Its many memories are beyond the spice trade. Memories of displacement, farming, trading, and surviving remain within this plant. Its ability to last beyond different periods has linked people and the land across different trading, violent, and even environmental activities. Nutmeg also remains within a different perspective. Its ecological significance cannot be overlooked.The way that people interact with landscapes to leave a mark and also the way that they can remember has also changed the perspective of many environmental scholars. Many environmental impacts are often described as slow violence, like what happened with nutmeg. Nutmeg had been trade goods, violent wars had been fought, and the environment changed along with other cultural changes, as well as a series of trade practices, some more trade practices, and many more trade practices.

Biocultural Justice

As environmental issues take priority over ecological harm, more emphasis is being placed on environmental justice. Biocultural justice concerns issues of culture as well as ecological harm. These concerns relate to cultural aspects such as ecological knowledge, economic benefit, land relations, cultural preservation, and history. Biocultural concerns pertain more strongly to colonial resources. The issues around colonizing commodities include taking control of land and taking other communities' resources, knowledge, and history. Because justice concerns cultural and environmental aspects, any compensation is not sufficient. Financial compensation may address most of the economic injustices, but as culture and history cannot be bought, other solutions must be explored. One such solution would be restoration, recognition, and revitalisation. Restorative solutions, however, may still exclude participation, and, therefore, may require recognition and, most importantly, participation. Biocultural justice provides the possibility for participation in ecological restoration and the cultural restitution of land. There are some conventions, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) and the Nagoya Protocol (2010), that help in establishing legal frameworks of control over cultural rights, knowledge, and genetic resources. While these are recent additions, they recognize that cultural rights and the community are essential for control over biological resources.

From Monopoly to Ecological Commons

The history of nutmeg also raises the question of the commons. A commons is not simply a resource owned by everyone. It is a social and ecological system governed through relationships, rules and shared responsibilities. Ostrom (1990) demonstrated that communities can develop institutions for managing common-pool resources without relying exclusively on either state ownership or private property. The colonial monopoly represented almost the opposite model. It attempted to convert a living ecological system into an exclusive commercial domain. Control replaced shared relationships. The plant became valuable because access could be restricted. This distinction is relevant to contemporary ecological governance. If biological resources are treated solely as commodities, market incentives may encourage extraction beyond ecological limits. If they are treated as commons embedded in community institutions, different forms of responsibility may become possible.

Re-reading Colonial Capitalism through the Nutmeg Tree

This sequence demonstrates that capitalism is not external to nature. It depends upon the organisation of nature. Moore (2015) argues that capitalism should be understood as a way of

organising nature, not merely as an economic system operating within a pre-existing natural world. Nutmeg illustrates this insight because colonial power reorganised the ecological world of Banda to serve accumulation. The concept of nature as an external resource is therefore historically produced. Ghosh's argument is that the modern planetary crisis is rooted partly in a worldview that treats the Earth as an inert storehouse of resources. The nutmeg story reveals how this worldview was connected with the violence of colonial conquest.

Implications for Contemporary Environmental Governance

The history narrated in The Nutmeg's Curse has contemporary implications. Modern environmental governance often focuses on conservation targets, carbon markets, supply-chain standards, certification and sustainable production. These mechanisms can be useful, but they may remain inadequate if they reproduce the abstraction that originally separated commodities from ecological and cultural relationships. A biocultural approach would require several shifts. First, supply chains should become more geographically and socially transparent. Consumers should be able to identify not only where commodities are produced but also the ecological and cultural conditions of production. Second, communities should have meaningful participation in decisions concerning biological resources and traditional knowledge. Third, benefit-sharing should recognise knowledge and cultural relationships rather than treating them as freely available information. Fourth, conservation should integrate cultural landscapes rather than automatically excluding human communities. Fifth, environmental policy should recognise historical responsibility. The ecological crisis is not distributed equally across time or space. Communities that contributed least to global ecological degradation can experience disproportionate harms. Historical analysis is therefore necessary for contemporary justice.

Critical Reflections and Limitations

A biocultural reading of nutmeg should not romanticise precolonial societies or assume that all local ecological practices were environmentally perfect. Communities are historically complex. Trade can be unequal even without colonialism, and local societies can also produce environmental pressures. The purpose of the argument is not to create a simple moral opposition between an idealised Indigenous past and a uniformly destructive European modernity. A second limitation concerns the concept of agency. Describing nutmeg as a more-than-human historical actor does not mean that the plant should be treated as a human political subject. Material agency should be understood carefully. Plants influence possibilities through their biological characteristics, but political decisions remain embedded in human institutions and power structures.

Conclusion

The story of nutmeg in Amitav Ghosh's The Nutmeg's Curse demonstrates how a plant can become a window into the history of colonial capitalism and the contemporary planetary crisis. Nutmeg begins as a living species embedded in the ecological and cultural landscape of the Banda Islands. Through European commercial expansion, it is transformed into a resource, then a commodity, then a monopoly, and finally an instrument of imperial power. Each transformation produces new relationships between people, plants, land, knowledge and capital.

The colonial transformation of nutmeg was therefore not merely economic. It was biocultural. It reorganised biological resources and cultural relationships simultaneously. The destruction and

displacement of Bandanese communities constituted social violence, while the restructuring of landscapes around monopoly production constituted ecological violence. The appropriation and disruption of local horticultural knowledge constituted epistemic violence. The concept of more-than-human history helps explain why nutmeg should be treated as more than a passive object. The plant's biological characteristics, geographical concentration and cultivation requirements shaped the possibilities of commerce and conquest. More-than-human history therefore does not remove human responsibility. It situates human action within a wider material world. The movement from nutmeg to the Anthropocene also demonstrates the importance of historical specificity. The planetary crisis cannot be explained simply by saying that "humans" changed the Earth. Particular institutions, economic systems and imperial projects organised the relationships through which ecological transformation occurred. The nutmeg story therefore supports approaches that place colonial capitalism, the Plantationocene and the Capitalocene alongside the Anthropocene. The most important conceptual conclusion is the need for biocultural justice. Justice must extend beyond the distribution of environmental benefits and harms. It must recognise the relationships among ecosystems, communities, species, knowledge and memory. It must address the historical separation of biological resources from the communities that have cultivated and understood them. Nutmeg is therefore more than a spice. It is a biocultural entity. It is a historical witness. It is a material participant in imperial history. It is a site where ecological and epistemic violence intersect. It is also a repository of cultural memory and a reminder that commodities have histories long before they reach markets.

Ghosh's central achievement is to make this hidden history visible. By following nutmeg from the Banda Islands into the structures of empire and planetary crisis, he demonstrates that the history of a plant can also be the history of capitalism, colonialism and ecological transformation. The nutmeg tree consequently becomes a powerful symbol for rethinking the relationship between human history and Earth history.

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