

Dilhani Dissanayake, 2020

Volume 6 Issue 2, pp. 404-410

Date of Publication: 20th August 2020

DOI- <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2020.62.404410>

This paper can be cited as: Dissanayake, D., (2020). *Commodities and History: A Literature Review on Commodity Histories*. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(2), 404-410.

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COMMODITIES AND HISTORY: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON COMMODITY HISTORIES

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Abstract

*Imperial commodities have been the subject of both popular and scholarly histories in recent years. A considerable amount of literature has been published on commodities such as tea, coffee, sugar, chocolate, tobacco, and spices such as pepper and cloves. Those commodity histories reveal the lure of exotics for Europeans, importantly the Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish and British, who engaged at various times in commercial imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, slave labour, commodity democratisation, changing diets and changing food habits. This paper presents a literature review on selected popular histories that examined commodities, for instance, Sidney W. Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1986), Roy Moxham's *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation, and Empire* (2004) and James Walvin's *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800* (1997). This literature review will help us to understand commodity histories literature in a broader perspective.*

Keywords

Commodity Histories, Literature Review, Empire, Exotics, Commodities

1. Introduction

The stories of commodities and having colonies which constitute the history of imperialism have been researched in recent decades and much detail by scholars and historians. Four European colonial powers - Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish and British - were

dazzled by the luxury exotics of far-distant regions such as Asia and Africa. Subsequently, these highly prized exotics became imperial commodities and those regions came under the control of European powers that forged far-flung empires. The changing tastes of people in these empires made labourers' lives in those colonies extremely complicated and gruelling. Most of the luxury exotics originally enjoyed only by the elites became available to the masses and played a key part in the daily lives of all social classes. Such narratives were eventually published in the form of popular histories on commodities, for instance, Sidney W. Mintz's *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1986), Roy Moxham's *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation and Empire* (2004), James Walvin's *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800* (1997), James Walvin, *Sugar: The World Corrupted, From Slavery to Obesity* (2018) and Andrew Dalby's *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* (2000).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sidney W. Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*

Important histories and theories have been published on the relationship between metropolitan taste and colonial labour. Sidney W. Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1986) demonstrates the link between the British working-class habit of drinking tea, and slavery in the Caribbean where sugar was produced. He (Mintz, 1986) reveals how Europeans became consumers and the colonies became producers. Besides the sweetness of sugar, there is a strong argument of commodity democratisation: how tea, once consumed only by the 'elites', became part of the wider society and permeated the lower classes. Like sugar, tea, and chocolate, cinnamon was once a 'fruit of empire', and later became a common food (Albala, 2003). In *The True History of Chocolate*, Coe and Coe (1996, p. 17 & 235) begin with a chapter titled 'The tree of the food of the gods' and end with a chapter called 'Chocolate for the masses'. This work demonstrates how chocolate became democratised and more affordable to the lower classes (Robbins, 2005). It could be argued in the same way that as bread and bakery items became easily accessible in Britain, so the use of cinnamon in these products became a widespread phenomenon and this effectively distanced cinnamon from its imperial origins in the minds of consumers (Dissanayake, 2019). Mintz (1986) engagingly has interwoven sugar and slavery, a crop is grown in Europe's tropical colonies: firstly used as an extraordinary luxury for the aristocracy; then secondly, transformed into a diet staple of the new industrial proletariat. Sugar in every historical sense connected with such matters as

imperial power and domination, exploitation of labour, African labour, slavery, and colonies. Furthermore, Mintz (1986) reveals how sugar has altered work patterns, eating habits, and diet in modern times.

2.2 Roy Moxham's *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation, and Empire*

Roy Moxham's *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation, and Empire* (2004) explores how the British desire for tea had devastating consequences for the colonies like India and Sri Lanka. The author demonstrates how the low wages, inadequate food, floggings, substandard housing and lack of medical care created miserable and slave-like conditions for tea plantation workers in the colonies (Moxham, 2004). For example, Moxham (2004) shows how the Indian migrant workers - 'coolies' - worked under the British colonial regime in Sri Lanka and had to endure extreme hardships. Although this context (Moxham, 2004) is very different to that of the cinnamon industry, it does facilitate thinking about the peelers' working conditions under British colonial rule, the relationship between labour and the commodity, and importantly the broader politics of this commodity (Dissanayake, 2019).

2.3 James Walvin's *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800*

James Walvin's *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800* (1997), provide considerable knowledge about how exotics were Westernised and nationalised. Walvin (1997, p. IX) asks the question: 'what could be more British than a cup of sweet tea?' Although tea was exotic and exported over vast distances from India and Sri Lanka, British imperialism was able to change people's food and drinking habits to such an extent that this exotic eventually became synonymous with being British. The British in significant ways created their food identity out of the appropriation and adaptation of colonial exotics, for instance, chicken tikka masala and tea. He (Walvin, 1997) discusses several commodities - fruits of empire, emphasising his key points which are tea, coffee, tobacco, chocolate, potato, sugar - along with how Europeans became attracted to the east and how the commodities of empire changed consumption patterns back home. His (Walvin, 1997) main focus here was on several exotics which mentioned earlier were cultivated largely far away from Britain but were speedily adapted to British social life. The existing literature on commodity histories contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between imperialism, commodities and labour.

2.4 James Walvin's *Sugar: The World Corrupted, From Slavery to Obesity*

James Walvin (Walvin, 2018) provides an engaging overview of the history of sugar in his tome, *Sugar: The World Corrupted, From Slavery to Obesity*, exploring sugar's impact on the human diet, dating back to approximately the thirteenth century, and its substantial

role in the current global obesity crisis. He (Walvin, 2018) narrates the story of sugar from a luxury commodity of elites, transforming into an affordable commodity for the masses. Furthermore, Walvin (2018) examines how sugar came under U.S. corporate influence from the mid-nineteenth century, leading to the rise of the soft drink industry during and following World War II. Walvin (2018) discusses how sugar was an influential commodity beyond its commercial value. Similarly, cinnamon also acts as a cultural agent that represents Sri Lankan history and culture (Dissanayake, 2019). Walvin (2018) also discusses slavery extensively concerning sugar. His (Walvin, 2018) discussion on sugar provides a significant account of commodity histories detailing imperial power and slavery.

2.5 James Walvin's *English Urban Life, 1776-1851*

The works of imperial scholars who have an interest in metropolitan consumption have proved extremely relevant. Among them, James Walvin's *English Urban Life, 1776-1851* (1984) reinforces our understanding of the link between the changing food habits of Europeans and the increasingly diversified economy of Sri Lanka after 1833. Lizzie Collingham's *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* (2005) is a fascinating book which narrates how Indian tastes became British and how British dishes assimilated Indian cuisine for example, Collingham (2005) explains how chicken tikka masala, a hybrid cuisine, became the British national dish in 2001. Behind the British romance on colonial food, spices and 'exotics', lies the history of imperialism. Both Walvin (1984) and Collingham (2005) provide an understanding of the relationship between colony and metropole, particularly, the tastes of the metropole as having an impact on the labouring classes in the colonies. The changing tastes of metropolises made labourers' lives in the colonies extremely complicated and more hard-pressed, which is highly relevant to the colonial cinnamon peelers in Sri Lanka (Dissanayake, 2019).

2.6 Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe's *The True History of Chocolate*

Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe's *The True History of Chocolate* (1996) draws the attention of readers to the history of chocolate, from originally an extravagant exotic food to something common for the masses. They (Coe and Coe, 1996, p. 125-126) begin the story from as early as the tree and then discuss chocolate production, the empire and chocolate and finally chocolate for the masses: "It had been an elite drink among the copper-skinned, be feathered Mesoamericans, and it stayed that way among the white-skinned, perfumed, bewigged, overdressed royalty and nobility of Europe". Importantly they (Coe and Coe, 1996) discuss how cacao had been symbolically and ritually more valuable to the Aztecs than any economic and gastronomic value. They (Coe and Coe, 1996) nicely describe how the

French Revolution, which destroyed the Ancien Régime and rule of the church, and the Industrial Revolution, are events which changed chocolate from a costly drink to a portion of cheap food and also transformed the liquid chocolate into a solid. Finally, they (Coe and Coe, 1996) add extra value to the book by including illustrations.

2.7 Emma Robertson's *Chocolate, Women and Empire: A Social and Cultural History*

Emma Robertson's work, *Chocolate, Women and Empire: A Social and Cultural History* also draws attention to chocolate (2009). Robertson (2009, p. 81). argues how imperial literature, such as Knapp's *Cacao and Chocolate* (2007), attempted to familiarise the British with the exotic cocoa bean: "The purpose of this may well be to familiarise and domesticate foreign enterprise making it all part of British industry". Like cocoa, cinnamon existed in the British imagination as simultaneously exotic and familiar. Yet as a spice, cinnamon maintained more of its tropical allure (Dissanayake, 2019).

2.8 Andrew Dalby's *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices*

The scholarship on the history of spices gives the background on early consumption and trade. Andrew Dalby's *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* (2000) demonstrates how spices such as pepper, cinnamon, and cassia were associated with mythical stories. Dalby (2000) has gathered information from sources in many languages, explores each spice, interweaving its general history with the story of its discovery and various uses. He (Dalby, 2000) discusses some traditional spices that are still part of world trade such as cinnamon, cloves, ginger, pepper, saffron, and chilli. Dalby (2000) also extends his discussion on aromatics that are now little used in food but were highly important in the spice trade and to traditional medicines, for example, frankincense, myrrh, aloes-wood, and balsam of Mecca. According to him (Dalby, 2000), those spices and aromatics are the powerful, pleasurable, sensual ingredients used in foods, drinks, and scented in oils, perfumes, cosmetics. In addition to these topics, he (Dalby, 2000) asserts spices that were once significant in the spice trade or early consumption, are now almost forgotten, for instance, long pepper, cubebs, and grains of Paradise. Along with the historical information on certain spices, Dalby (2000) carefully detangles historical evidence and myths which dealt with the origin stories of spices. He (Dalby, 2000) then presents the various forms of spices that have been served as appetisers, digestives, antiseptics, therapeutics, tonics, condiments and aphrodisiacs.

2.9 John Keay's *The Spice Route: A History*

Like other scholars who published on the early spice trade or spice consumption patterns, John Keay's *The Spice Route: A History* (2006) describes the rise of early spice trading with the arrival of Europeans in the east. He (Keay, 2006) argues the lure of spices for

Europeans triggered developments in shipbuilding, navigational science, and led to European assertions of superiority over other cultures and then to dominion and empire. Keay (2006) shows how origin stories of spices that were made up, came from unseen, uninhabitable, and unattainable lands. He (Keay, 2006) extends his story on how the trade-in spices were established and how empires dominated the participation in it, how they fought for it, and significantly how those discoveries caused other global exchanges. This book reveals the ancient spice route with the aid of various sources including ancient geographies, travellers' accounts, mariners' handbooks, and ships' logs (Keay, 2006). Further, Keay (2006) tells the story of ancient Egyptians and Romans, and later on Columbus, de Gama and Magellan who set sail on their spice quests and other objectives of exploration. For instance, he (Keay, 2006) reveals how ancient Egyptians were pioneers of maritime trade and acquired the incense of Arabia, while Roman ships were able to find pepper and ginger on their way to India, how Columbus sailed west for spices, de Gama sailed east for spices and finally Magellan, sailed across the Pacific on the same quest, spices. This book assists in helping us understand the early background of the spice trade, specifically the 'spice route', but offers little or nothing on spices like cinnamon (Dissanayake, 2019).

3. Conclusion

The allure of the commodity for the imperial powers and the changing tastes in each European empire created a new chapter in history. Some scholars and historians have focused on those stories which finally became popular sources on commodity histories. These sources on commodity histories provide highly mediated information on the exotic locations, the nature of the colonies and how they operated, imperial power, changes in food habits and the harsh realities of exploitation. A vast range of literature on various commodities reveals the importance of learning commodity histories and especially the focus of scholars on those specific histories.

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