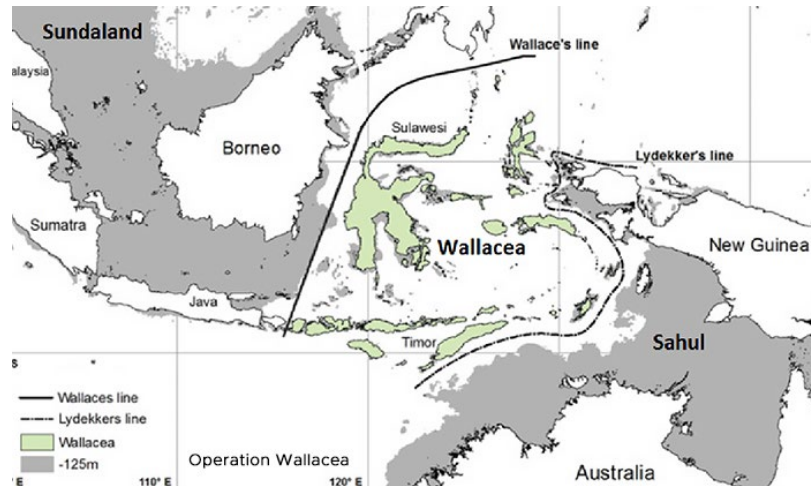


15 Botany and colonialism

To the south-west of Borneo lies Wallacea, a biogeographical group of islands bounded by the Moluccas and Banda Seas. Its western edge that separates it biogeographically from Borneo is marked by the Wallace Line which explains the name given to this faunal transitional zone between Asia



(Sunda Shelf) and Australia (Sahul Shelf). While differences in faunal characteristics have long distinguished the regions to the east and west of the Wallace line, recent research has shown that Wallacea is a distinct floral area with many endemic drought-tolerant plants.

Spices are a common culinary item nowadays. But, they were once rare and valuable commodities in centuries past. Their relative availability, price and utility now belie their harbouring a very dark history for their places of origin.

Nutmeg and mace are parts of the fruit of *Myristica fragrans*. Along with cloves, they are indigenous to the Maluku Islands (also known as the Moluccas; the Spice Islands). This brought the Portuguese to the islands in pursuit of trade in those spices, especially after they established themselves in Malacca through conquest of the latter port by Alfonso de Albuquerque in 1511.



Nutmeg showing mace enveloping the nut



Cloves

In 1599, the Dutch arrived and eventually displaced the Portuguese. To exert control and monopoly over the nutmeg trade, the Dutch through the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC) waged genocidal war and enslaved the people of the Banda Islands in Wallacea. The Dutch eventually controlled all of the Banda Islands except Pulau Rhun

which was controlled by the British. After four wars between the two European powers over their colonial territories, the Treaty of Breda (a town in the Netherlands) in 1667 saw the British giving away Pulau Rhun to the Dutch in exchange for which the latter ceded their North American island of New Amsterdam which was called *Manhattan* by the indigenous people there. As part of a British colony and later the United States of America after the War of Independence (1775 – 1783), the settlement eventually grew to become New York. This giant metropolis owes its origins to nutmeg. Methinks the Dutch had the raw end of the deal in trading of the two islands in the long run. But, in the short term, with their monopoly control of the nutmeg trade, the Dutch could sell the spice at a 60,000 percent markup (Koehler, 2021)¹⁴.

Like nutmeg, cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*) were similarly prized for both medicinal and culinary uses, but the Dutch did not have as much control of this spice because the botany of this plant was more widespread than nutmeg and therefore harder for them to police a monopoly over it. Though cloves also originated in the Maluku Islands, by the end of the 19th century, Zanzibar off East Africa was the capital of cloves (though nowadays, with 80% of global output, Indonesia is the world's largest producer).

Elsewhere in historiography, ugly “spice imperialism” was also evident in Sri Lanka. The West and Middle-East had prized cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum* is “true” cinnamon) since ancient times and the West looked through various early voyages of discovery to find out where traders of the spice obtained their supply from. Eventually, the home of the true cinnamon in Sri Lanka was stumbled upon. This led to the domination of the trade and people by the Portuguese and later the Dutch. In India, the home of the malapropism “curry”, black pepper (“black gold”) (*Piper nigrum*) cultivation and production in Kerala was also subsumed by the Portuguese.

The appearance of Europeans and the projection of their power in the East was via their voyages of discovery sparked by their quest for spices. I am sure that the people of the East would wonder why they needed to be “discovered”. They already knew where they were and who they were. “Discovery” then, is from a euro-centric perspective. Peoples in the East were already in eras of magnificent civilizations when Europeans were still living in grass huts.

It could be said that the appearance of Europeans in Asia ostensibly to establish trade was the first manifestation of globalization, something which in the last couple of decades through a different set of economic circumstances has been of great social significance. Globalisation can be said to be “a world becoming interconnected through trade and cultural exchange” although during the era of colonization, the trade only benefited the Europeans (the natives were not equal partners) and the cultural exchange was largely the imposition of one culture over another. The past and current instances of globalization are

¹⁴ Koehler, J. (2021) Spice migrations: Nutmeg. Aramco World; May/June

rooted in capitalism but in the past, it was undeniably subjugation and exploitation by military might. Nowadays it is domination or prevailing by economic strength or efficiency. That the Portuguese, the Spanish and later the British were able to go around the world to subjugate peoples was enabled by the common fact that they were maritime nations with both a merchant marine and navies. It was both a blessing and a curse to the Spice Islands to have their unique botany (spice bounty) because it brought unwanted masters from outside the neighbourhood. This where Borneo can be considered truly lucky.

Through the divide of the Wallace Line¹⁵ and the biogeographical/climatic characteristics of Wallacea, Borneo's botany did not give rise to much by way of valuable spices which would attract the European powers to its shores. For Sarawak, European arrival was via James Brooke who, with his two successors Charles and Charles Vyner, exerted largely benevolent rule over the native and immigrant inhabitants (except for a period when the British government questioned efforts to control (wantonly kill) so-called pirates/rebels). Thus, Borneo in general and Sarawak in particular, escaped a history of cruel European machinations over the spice trade. In any case, the bounty which botany conferred onto many countries or regions did not last, again because of globalization. Spices were eventually grown and produced around the world where the climate was suitable. Nutmeg is now grown in Grenada, Sri Lanka, India and even Malaysia. Cloves are now produced in Zanzibar, Madagascar, India, and Sri Lanka. Outside of the spices, the rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) which was originally only found in the Amazon rainforest, is now cultivated in many other countries (Malaya being a notable place and consequently a target of the Japanese in the Second World War) after the British had seeds smuggled out from Brazil in 1875. Black Pepper is cultivated across many Asian countries today. This is not to say that all colonialism was evil and bad. WOGs ("Westernized Oriental Gentleman") like me manifest a cultural implant for the better.

My father and all his brothers bar perhaps Uncle John were English-schooled in a time when many contemporaries were Chinese-schooled. Such advantage was English schooling seen by my grandfather's generation that some sons of his siblings who had migrated to Thailand were sent onward to settle in Sarawak so that they can avail English schooling. One of them eventually became the Director of the Sarawak Department of Posts & Telecommunication.

With their English-schooling, my father and his siblings went on to serve in various departments of the British colonial government. Likewise, my cousins were all also English-schooled and even today I continue to encounter the range of their vocabularies which confirms a deeper schooling than meets the eye. It is inescapable than being anglophones means that some cultural aspects of the language are also absorbed. This is manifested in

¹⁵ So named after Alfred Wallace who independently conceived the theory of evolution through natural selection. His 1855 paper 'On the Law which has Regulated the Introduction of New Species' is generally known as the "Sarawak Law" paper because he wrote it during a 14-month stay in Sarawak. Many say that Wallace's thoughts on the subject prompted Charles Darwin to publish his own theory "On the Origin of Species" in 1859.

some behaviour and mannerisms. One of the main characteristics if one were to point them out, would be that of being rather reserved (such that “aloof” is often an accusation levelled at those who are taciturn). One of the unfortunate English behaviours which I imbibed, is that to this day, I find it hard to speak to anyone without first being formally introduced. Rather toffee-nosed, eh what? Fortunately, spending most of my adulthood in Australia has encouraged a degree of gregariousness and larrikinism in me. My guess is that people such as my extended family of the English-schooled can be a bit hard to decipher in character because we do not always respond to situations in the Chinese manner.

My rather benign view of British colonialism is at odds with something which was recounted to me by a fellow PhD student in the same research lab as me at the University of Western Australia. Manase Salema¹⁶ was a Tanzanian government scholarship student. He once told me that I had too obliging a view of the whites and their time as colonial masters. I responded to him by saying that my assessment was based on my observations and it did not whitewash anything or bend to the idea that whites were superior (something which I suspected were the thoughts which he thought I harboured). What is also true although it did not occur to me at the time, is that I had grown up with white friends because I was living in a community where many of the families were expatriates from the United Kingdom and its Dominions. I asked him why his view of the British masters in Tanzania (then Tanganyika) was so different. He recounted to me his eye witnessing a teacher in his school being slapped by a white woman school supervisor. This story was certainly jarring to me as it did not represent my experience of the British in Kuching (I limit the geography to where I had this experience rather than making a more sweeping statement). History as it does, depends on the perspective which one views it from. I am fortunate that my perspective is from one where I think the colonial masters (the Brooke White Rajahs included) were trying to make things better – to develop the place.

¹⁶ I lost touch with Manesa after he finished his studies and went back to Tanzania in the mid-80s. One day in Sydney in the early part of this new Millennium, I was randomly scanning through the wavelengths on my long-range shortwave radio set in Sydney (a hobby) for the most distant broadcasts, I came across an overseas BBC broadcast. As I listened, I recognised a voice. It was Manesa and he was talking about malaria eradication in his country. What a coincidence to have “caught” up with him by hearing him talk from thousands of miles away.