

Plantiness, Multispecies Conviviality and Changing Human- Plant Geographies



ABSTRACT

The essay examines changing human-plant geographies in Kodagu, situated in the Western Ghats in southern India. Paying attention to Kodagu helps investigate how plantiness impacts resource politics in indigenous landscapes across pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial timeframes. This essay will study Sarita Mandanna's *Tiger Hills* (2010) and Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* (2010) from a bioregional perspective to understand the importance of native plants, forests, vegetal and feral spaces across Kodagu's shifting societies and timeframes and examine how human-plant encounters redefine the role of plants in Kodagu's more-than-human geographies. With a particular focus on the Kodava ritual of Kailpodh, this essay will investigate how humans often classify plants as native, invasive, weeds, sacred and unwanted, depending on their impact on human social life, and how ritualising plants such as rajakirita (*Gloriosa superba*) helps to reinhabit Kodagu and deepens the Kodava human-plant interaction across space and time.

KEYWORDS

decolonial bioregionalism, human-plant geographies, plantiness, multispecies conviviality, vegetal political ecology, indigenous knowledge, Kodagu/Coorg, decolonisation.



INTRODUCTION

Human-plant interaction has been the fundamental aspect of cultural ecology since Julian Steward (Head 2007; Head and Atchison 2009). Plants provide human sustenance and are essential for food, ecology and cultures. These material performances of plants, also known as 'plantiness', have been defining human-plant geographies for centuries (Head, Atchison and Gates 2012; Head and Atchison 2009). Nevertheless, humans often classify plants as native, invasive, weeds, sacred and unwanted, depending on their impact on human social life (Argüelles and March 2022). From the perspective of vegetal political ecology, the agency of plants actively contributes to more-than-human environmental politics based on their plantiness (Barua 2014; Head, Atchison, Phillips et al. 2014; Robbins 2007).

The concept of plantiness was first introduced and defined by Lesley Head, Jennifer Atchison and Alison Gates as 'the assemblage of qualities

that makes a plant' (2012: 3). Plantiness, however, does not depend on a single quality or characteristics of plant but rather on an 'assemblage' that combines material characteristics – that is, modes of representation of how plants are identified with respect to particular material capacities (Head, Atchison and Gates 2012: 26–30; Atchison and Head 2013: 955; Pitt 2017: 97). At the core, it is the biological characteristics of plants that configure their material capacities and help plants become essential players in human social life (2012: 27; Argüelles and March 2022: 1). However, disciplines such as cultural ecology, landscape research, human geography and environmental anthropology have repeatedly established that exploring the role of plants to determine their plantiness or considering the impact of plantiness on human-plant encounters depends on three interdependent variables – place, culture and power-laden societal structures – rather than the biological capabilities of the plants (Argüelles and March 2022: 2; Fleming 2017: 27; Hinchliffe and Whatmore 2006: 135; Rose and Van Dooren 2012: 16). Simply stated, plantiness refers to the role or performance of plants in a particular place, community and culture.

For a deeper understanding of the theory of plantiness, it is, therefore, crucial to know the shared characteristics common to the biological group of plants in different societies and cultures, how plants live, think, communicate and perform as active agents in human social life across various timeframes (Hall 2011; Chamovitz 2012; Marder 2013: 156–60; Pitt 2017). The coupling of plant performance across different times and places and how different societies and cultures perceive plants and their plantiness is what Head, Atchison, Phillips et al. (2014) call *vegetal political ecology*. *Vegetal politics* is, therefore, understanding plants' material and political status by recognising plants and their multiple engagements with and beyond humans (Head, Atchison, Phillips et al. 2014: 861–63; Argüelles and March 2022). '*Vegetal political ecology*' thus includes investigating collaborative practices and conflicted relationships between humans and plants, challenging cultural, economic and socio-political frames, understanding the changing more-than-human geographies in specific places and documenting/envisaging the exploitative economy related to the belongingness and relocation of plants. Precisely, *vegetal political ecology* addresses the 'botanical realm and the complexities of plant ontology' (Ryan 2018: 128). With this understanding, it is essential to investigate how plantiness impacts resource

politics in Indian indigenous landscapes such as Kodagu across pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial timeframes, and how human-plant encounters redefine the role of plants in Kodagu's more-than-human geographies.¹

To answer these questions, building on S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich's concept of multispecies ethnography and Peter Berg and Raymond F. Dasmann's concept of bioregionalism, I here examine Sarita Mandanna's *Tiger Hills* (2010) and Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* (2010) to understand the importance of native plants, forests, vegetal and feral spaces across Kodagu's shifting societies and timeframes.² In doing so, I investigate the plantiness of individual plants and how the classification of plants as native, invasive, weeds, sacred and unwanted depends on their impact on human social life. With a particular focus on the Kodava ritual of Kailpodh, I examine the transition of rajakirita (*Gloriosa superba*) within Kodagu's changing landscapes and societies from being 'native' to 'unwanted', 'invasive', 'weed' to becoming the indigenous 'sacred' ingredient used in the Kodava ritual of Kailpodh.

Kodagu is situated in the Western Ghats in Karnataka in South India and is home to the indigenous Kodava community.³ In pre-colonial India, the Kodava community perceived the plants as their more-than-human companions and valued their material performances to configure their place-based culture. However, since the nineteenth century, European colonisers caused massive deforestation in the Kodagu

- 1 In this essay, I use the term 'indigenous' to refer to the Kodava people and their culture, heritage, knowledge system and lifeways that grew *in situ* prior to colonisation; see Shaw, Herman and Dobbs 2006: 268. Because Kodava ancestors owned the land in Kodagu prior to colonisation, and they share a strong spiritual connection with their ancestral land, I call the Kodava people 'indigenous'. I use the term 'landscape' to refer to a panoramic view or a cultural image of place (here, Kodagu), an individualist way of seeing and conjuring the natural scenery that separates the subject from the object by eliminating alternative modes of experiencing our relations with nature; see Cosgrove 1984: 13, 262; Pavord 2016: 353; Stilgoe 2015: ix, 17–18, 31.
- 2 In this essay, 'native' refers to the plant and animal species that 'occur naturally in a particular region [here, Kodagu], state, ecosystem, and habitat without direct or indirect human actions' and do not cause any harm to the environment; see Guaişu 2016; Morse, Swearingen and Randall 2000.
- 3 Kodagu is the indigenous name of Coorg. Kodava people are also known as Coorgs.

tropical highlands to establish colonial coffee plantations (Nambisan 2010; Gadgil and Guha 2012).⁴ The continuous global thinning of native plant species in Kodagu led to immense biodiversity loss, transforming, affecting, and displacing human and more-than-human lives.

Paying attention to Kodagu provides an example of adopting a decolonial bioregional approach that transforms colonial coffee plantations into sites of multispecies conviviality and resituates human-plant relationships ecologically to perform conservation and restoration activities. Multispecies conviviality refers to the fundamental aspect of living well together with more-than-humans (Donati 2019). The decolonial bioregional approach aims towards living a convivial lifeway that decolonises most of the economic, social and cultural activity around a naturally defined region/bioregion and helps overcome climate crisis and ecological breakdown. This line of inquiry builds on the emerging anthropological concept of ‘multispecies ethnography’, which Kirksey and Helmreich (2010) explain investigates ‘how a multitude of organisms’ livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces’ (2010: 546). In examining this interrelatedness, multispecies ethnographers study ‘contact zones where lines separating nature from culture have broken down, where encounters between *Homo sapiens* and other beings generate mutual ecologies and coproduced niches’ (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010: 546–47). The advent of European colonisation in Kodagu broke down their traditional nature-culture relationship separating their culture from nature.⁵ To mend traditional ways and remain rooted in place, the Kodava people began to ritualise native plants and forests to reinhabit their bioregion – that is, to decolonise the European coffee plantation culture and practise ‘more-than-human conviviality’ (Rigby 2018: 73) on the plantations to ‘generate mutual ecologies’ (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010: 547).⁶ Kate Rigby defines ‘more-than-human conviviality’ as ‘resituating ‘humankind ecologically’ along with

4 Coffee in Kodagu is a non-native plant. Continuous coffee cultivation in Kodagu led to massive topsoil erosion.

5 I use the term ‘tradition’ and ‘traditional’ to refer to Kodagu’s historical practice, a ‘central process of Indigenous survival and renewal’; see Clifford 2013: 28–29

6 I use the term ‘place’ to refer to the Kodagu ‘spaces’ that the Kodava people have ‘made meaningful’ and are ‘attached to’ in one or more ways; see Cresswell 2004: 7–8.

‘otherkind (plants, animals, and fungi, but potentially also rivers, wetlands, and woods, for example) ethically’ (2018: 73).

Specifically, to understand how Kodava indigenous ecological knowledge includes more-than-human conviviality, this article draws inspiration from two place-based historical fictions: Sarita Mandanna’s *Tiger Hills* and Kavery Nambisan’s *The Scent of Pepper*.⁷ *Tiger Hills* and *The Scent of Pepper* are set in Kodagu at particular epochs, depicting pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Kodava society. *Tiger Hills* begins with a pre-colonial Kodava lifeway and narrates the communal experiences of the Kodava people with the advent of the European agency. Spanning four generations, *Tiger Hills* tells the life story and communal lifeways of Devi, an independent dominant female persona, and Devi’s childhood friend and later husband, Devanna. The novel narrates the influence of European colonisation, the establishment of the coffee plantations in Kodagu and how this transformed the sociocultural lifeways and the ecology of the place and the people between 1878 and 1936. *The Scent of Pepper* begins around 1855 and ends with the uprising leading to Indian independence. Set in Athur in Kodagu, the novel narrates the changing lifeways of Nanji, a strong-headed Kodava woman, her son Subbu and her grandson Thimmu. The novel significantly shows the transformations of Kodagu’s nature and culture across four generations, describing pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Kodagu.

Inspired by plantiness and its role in shaping human cultures, I focus on Sarita Mandanna’s *Tiger Hills* and Kavery Nambisan’s *The Scent of Pepper* to show how literary narratives help understand plants’ social and material production. A significant enquiry into these texts demonstrates how specific native plant species and their plantiness have been intricately woven into ‘the social fabric of place and community’ (De 2022b: 37) and encourage convivial lifeways to live-in-place and reinhabit the Kodagu bioregion.⁸ Reading Sarita Mandanna’s *Tiger Hills* and Kavery Nambisan’s *The Scent of Pepper*, in the following section, ‘Plantiness and bioregional culture in pre-colonial Kodagu’, I will

7 In addition to the historical novels of Sarita Mandanna and Kavery Nambisan, this essay includes qualitative ethnographic data (such as personal conversations) from my fieldwork in Kodagu between 2016 and 2018 and refers to ethnographic texts on Kodagu: see Perry 1855; Richter 1870; Thurston 1913.

8 Living-in-place and reinhabitation are core bioregional concepts; see Berg and Dasmann 1978.

first contextualise convivial Kodava lifeway in pre-colonial Kodagu to understand the importance of more-than-human spaces and how the plantiness of native plants defines Kodava bioregional culture. The next section, 'Rajakirita, more-than-human spaces and the ritual of survival', will explore the diverse more-than-human spaces in Kodagu and illuminate how material performances of plants shape Kodagu's indigenous culture, with particular reference to rajakirita and Kailpodh. The third section, 'Changing human-plant geographies and vegetal political ecology', examines the vegetal politics that changed human-plant geographies in colonial Kodagu, followed by the fourth section illustrating how bioregional reinhabitation endorses convivial worldmaking in colonial and post-colonial Kodagu. I will conclude by summarising how the transition of rajakirita and coffee within the transforming Kodava society deepens Kodava human-plant interaction across space and time.

PLANTINESS AND BIOREGIONAL CULTURE IN PRE-COLONIAL KODAGU

The Scent of Pepper begins with the 'maniacal music' of the jackal 'in the bamboo groves' when 'the sun bled behind the areca palms' (Nambisan 2010: 3). *The Tiger Hills* opens with Devi's birth on 'a clear day in July' with the sowing season upon them' and 'every field in Coorg' filled with white herons and 'bright green paddy' (Mandanna 2010: 3). *The Scent of Pepper* begins describing the forested landscape of pre-colonial Kodagu, whereas *Tiger Hills* begins showing how the livelihoods of the Kodava people are intertwined with their landscape. Before colonisation, the Kodava people were mainly hunter-gatherers and forest dwellers, also cultivating their staple food, rice, in paddy fields. From a bioregional perspective, the Kodava community was living-in-place. Living-in-place means living in harmony with nature, 'following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are uniquely presented by a particular site, and evolving ways to ensure long-term occupancy of that site' (Berg and Dasmann 1978: 217).

Living-in-place in Kodagu means practicing multispecies conviviality in everyday life. *The Scent of Pepper* and *Tiger Hills* describe Kodava homes inclusive of plants and livestock: the bitter lemon and mango trees in front and the fringe of areca palms along the chicken coop, the

granary, the pigsty and the barn adjacent to their paddy fields (Mandanna 2010; Nambisan 2010). The presence of the livestock with the plants within the home premises shows that the community considered the more-than-human as their kin. In pre-colonial harmony, multispecies conviviality was the social dimension of the Kodava lifeway where the Kodava people ‘share[d] an unshakable sense of kinship’ to ‘their land’ (Poonacha 1997; Mandanna 2010: 26). They considered Iguthappa Swami as ‘the god of the hills’ and Ayappa Swami as the ‘god of the jungle’ (Mandanna 2010; Nambisan 2010; Perry 1855; Richter 1870).⁹

Deborah Bird Rose and Thom Van Dooren state that conviviality requires inclusiveness and humans should ‘make room for the other in activities and shared spaces’ (2012: 17). As a hunter-gatherer community, the pre-colonial Kodava community included native plants in their daily activities. During festivals, Kodagu women climbed forested hills in search of wildflowers and wore them on their ears, while Kodava men collected toddy from the doub or tal palm trees (*Borassus flabellifer*, native to Kodagu) for toddy-drinking sessions (Nambisan 2010: 19, 41). Mandanna and Nambisan provide extensive narratives about the Kodava native plants, their material performances and how they were included in the lived-in Kodava communal spaces. For example, ‘madh toppu’ or medicinal green (*Justicia wynaadensis*) was cooked along with ‘jaggery and coconut milk at the onset of monsoons’ (Mandanna 2010: 52). Because it prevented ‘no fewer than forty-seven maladies’ when consumed during the monsoons, it was known as the magical leaves of the monsoons (Mandanna 2010: 52). Banana (*Musa acuminata* and *Musa balbisiana*) is another native plant cherished by the Kodava community and serves an integral part of their daily lived-in experience. They use banana leaves as plates, curry the stem, consume banana as fruit and boil a ‘pot of banana’ until it ‘turned sticky purple-red’ to prepare jam and store it in jars (Nambisan 2010: 27). This shows that the pre-colonial Kodava community was entirely reliant on plant-based resources at the base of their existence.¹⁰ Viewing plants as a sustainable source of diet and integrating them into daily lived-in experiences and

9 The Kodava word ‘Swami’ means Lord in English.

10 Kodagu’s sustainable native plant-based diet is called ‘bioregional eating’; see De 2022b.

culture shows that the pre-colonial Kodava community unknowingly lived a more ecological and bioregional lifeway.

Plants play a 'crucial role in the formative myths of all cultures, from Yggdrasil, the World Tree of Norse lore, to Asvattha, the cosmic tree of the Upanishads, to the . . . Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden' (Laist 2013: 10). From the thirteenth century, Indian Bhasa literature made various references to native flowers and plants that have shaped traditional cultures in diverse Indian societies (Ward 1999: 15–16). Similarly, plants are pivotal in defining the indigenous Kodava belief system. The Kodava community considers the native butter tree (*Madhuca longifolia*) as 'sacred' because it was beloved by Krishna Swami, the Hindu god, who used the spoon-shaped leaves to steal butter from his mother's churn (Mandanna 2010: 53). According to Kodava indigenous knowledge, the pipal, also known as the sacred fig (*Ficus religiosa*) and the wild gooseberry (*Physalis minima*), has immense medicinal use, brings good luck and provides shade, and its wood is used in daily Kodava lifeways for cooking and warming the house and livestock (Mandanna 2010: 53). The Kodava believe the Ashoka tree (*Saraca asoca*) to be a 'no-sadness' tree because 'all woes' are banished if a Kodava sits 'beneath its branches' (Mandanna 2010: 54). Kodava folklore states that the Ashoka tree only flowers when a beautiful woman places her henna-tipped feet upon its trunk (Mandanna 2010: 54). These botanical associations and imaginations reflect on how Kodagu's origin myths perceived plants and plantiness.

From Kodagu's formative myths and folktales, it becomes evident that the material performances and 'cultural background' of plants define who they are, their 'ontological boundaries' and basic assumptions of how these plants potentially contribute to shaping Kodagu's indigenous cultures (Laist 2013: 14; Marder 2012, 2015). Here, 'culture' refers to ways of living, lifeways and economic contribution to society. The 'cultural background of plants' refers to 'interactions and relationships among plants as well as between plants, other organisms, and the environment' (Gagliano and Grimonprez 2015: 149; Marder 2013). From a bioregional perspective, native plants determine the bioregional culture of a place to support life sustainably (Snyder 1990: 49; Thayer 2003: 36). 'Bioregional culture' refers to communal practices in the daily life of the bioregion (De 2022b: 42). While illuminating how native plant species define the bioregional culture of a place, Gary Snyder

explains how maize, rice and sweet potato indicate places and cultures (in Portland, Oregon) (1990: 49). Hence, the plantiness of Kodagu's native plant species defines Kodagu's bioregional culture.

RAJAKIRITA, MORE-THAN-HUMAN SPACES AND THE RITUAL OF SURVIVAL

Since the pre-colonial period, rajakirita (*Gloriosa superba*) has defined Kodagu's bioregional culture and is closely linked to the Kodava socio-cultural world that defines their livelihood. Rajakirita is also known as the gunflower and is considered 'the favoured flower of heroes' (Nambisan 2010: 11). *The Scent of Pepper* mentions how Nanji kept 'bunches of Rajakirita ... in a copper pitcher' on the table of his father-in-law to rejuvenate his mood when he was grieving the death of his younger son Machu (Nambisan 2010: 11). Mandanna in *Tiger Hills* describes rajakirita as 'the gun flower groves that grew in the jungles of Coorg but withered away in captivity' (2010: 54). They bloomed each year for only one week, during the traditional festival of Kailpodh, also known as Kailmuhurtha, a festival of arms celebrated every year on 3 September to mark the commencement of Kodagu's hunting season. Rajakirita is an orange-yellow blossom that the Kodava community used in pre-colonial Kodagu to decorate the mouth of every gun during Kailpodh (Mandanna 2010: 54). According to the traditional Kodagu belief system, the celebration of Kailpodh remains incomplete without rajakirita.

In Kodagu, rajakirita thus defines the 'practical mode of signification to the spiritual and cultural kind of symbolism that flowers have come to embody' (Laist 2013: 14). Rajakirita's diverse material performances make it 'biologically intimate' (Argüelles and March 2022: 45) to the Kodava community. Kodava interactions with rajakirita include using the flowers to rejuvenate mood, performing hunting rituals and celebrating Kailpodh. These enrich the symbolic profile of rajakirita in Kodava communal living. More importantly, the relationship between rajakirita and the Kodava community shows how plants and human culture are deeply interwoven and how plants shape cultures and livelihoods around them. This becomes more prominent in understanding the ritual of Kailpodh and how this particular ritual is entirely dependent on the performances of plants, their meaningful contribution to

Kodava human life, and the human-plant relationship embedded in the crux of their socio-cultural, ecological and bioregional framework for sustainable livelihood in Kodagu.

During pre-colonial Kailpodh celebrations, the Kodava people worshipped their traditional hunting weapons with exceptional food and offerings. The Kodava ritual of Kailpodh is also known as the ritual of survival because it is a celebration of respecting their forests, hunter-gatherer culture and livelihood (Machaia, personal conversation). Hunting and gathering forest produce for food and rituals was integral to Kailpodh celebrations. This shows how the plants and their plantiness helped the Kodava community to ‘perform’ and ‘do’ the landscape (De 2022a: 231–32; Olwig 2008: 87). ‘Performing’ and ‘doing’ the landscape with eyes, ears, nose is equivalent to experiencing the sense of place and contributes to defining the bioregional culture of place (De 2022a: 231; Olwig 2008: 82, 87). For example, during Kailpodh, Kodava women follow forest trails to collect jasmine flowers in plantain leaves and stitch them into long strings to adorn their long plaits because of their beautiful smell (Mandanna 2010: 106). In collecting jasmine from the forested landscapes, the Kodava women practise their traditional culture and perform in the landscape where the smell of jasmine and the jasmine itself become synonymous with Kailpodh, identifying with the sense of place and its dominant culture. Conviviality, then, appears to be a matter of living well and respecting nature. Bioregional living-in-place shares the same fundamental concerns of living well in harmony with nature.

Living-in-place in Kodagu thus endorses multispecies conviviality.¹¹ Conviviality, here, primarily refers to living in harmony with more-than-humans. To understand how Kodava indigenous practices are bioregional and convivial, it becomes pertinent to know how Kodagu’s food and eating practices are linked to their bioregion. Kelly Donati employs conviviality ‘to explore the co-constituted social worlds’ of gastronomy (2019: 119). This means that food items and communal eating practices build a bioregional culture that encourages sustainability. The foundations of Kodava gastronomy can be configured from

11 Kodava indigenous practices are inherently bioregional and endorse a convivial relationship with more-than-humans even before the official terms of bioregionalism and multispecies conviviality were introduced to the academic lexicon.

their traditional dietary habits, which include (but are not limited to) ‘cardamom-clove-and-cashew-studded rice’ heaped on banana leaves (Mandanna 2010: 105), partridge fried in pork, ‘salted pork, dried mathi [dried sardine], pickled mangoes’ (Nambisan 2010: 212–13), ‘mutton curry with soft and thread noolu puttoo [rice dumplings], pork pulav [a variety of rice prepared with pork] with wild mango chutney, and payasam [sweet porridge] flavoured with poppy seeds” (63), hot ottis [rice flour chapatti] with crab chutney [sweet crab pickle], fried bamboo shoots (Mandanna 2010: 129), mutton bones seasoned with onions and peppercorns (19), fish stuffed with coriander and tamarind, crisp sizzling pork (13). The consumption of meat from native animals is bioregional because it is collected by the hunter-gatherer community after ritualistic slaughtering and hunting in the wild. Since primordial times, Kodava traditional gastronomy has been a more-than-human endeavour where bioregional eating takes on a more-than-human convivial approach while maintaining the perfect balance in the local food chain and remaining fundamentally indebted to the native plants and their plantiness.

At its etymological roots, conviviality attends fundamentally to the question of living well together (Donati 2019). Conviviality ‘reknits’ social bonds (Gertenbach, Lamla and Laser 2021: 392; Latouche, 2009: 42). Given that the Kodava community shares a kincentric relationship with their more-than-human world, hunting and slaughtering play significant roles in the traditional Kodava belief system, are associated with the honour and the ecology of the region and are considered sacred. Based on animistic ideology, hunting, meat, food, and traditional festivals are closely related to Kailpodh, Kodagu’s daily gastronomy, and indigenous lived-in experiences.¹² During hunting, the forests represent nature, the space for more-than-humans. The collective plantiness of different kinds of native plants within Kodagu’s feral spaces contributes to hunter-gatherer traditions. For example, rajakirita is used to evoke spirits and pay homage to the souls of more-than-humans before killing them. Similarly, ‘the leaves of narvisha’, also known as nirvishi (*Chassalia curviflora*), have ‘a pungent odour that was anathema to snakes, poisonous even to the mighty tiger’ and hence are used to deter animals from

12 Animistic ideology here refers to the philosophical and religious concept founded on belief in the existence of multiple spirits; see Rooney 2000: 135. Indigenous hunting follows bioregional parameters of place-based culture and connects profoundly with the ecology, plantiness and animal spirits; see De 2022b.

attacking (Mandanna 2010: 52). As a result, in Kodava feral spaces, plants were both provider and protector to the Kodava hunters. As providers, the trees collectively created forests, the feral spaces providing the hunting ground, and simultaneously protected the hunter in the wild spaces with their material performances.

The material performances of plants, then, collectively created and protected pre-colonial Kodava native feral spaces. In the Kodagu bioregional context, the hunter, the hunted, the veneration of the weapons used to hunt wild animals, the use of forest produce to perform hunting rituals and the forests all reciprocate the belief in the sacred and provide evidence of convivial worldmaking. Invoking animal spirits in Kodagu rituals such as Kailpodh and during hunting is another example of doing and performing the Kodava landscape. Here, convivial worldmaking includes humans, more-than-humans (animals, plants) and multiple spirits. Rane Willerslev argues that humans exist in a 'betwixt-and-between state' representing the souls of animals and humans (2007: 165). Respecting the hunter, the hunted, the forests, and staying protected from their more-than-human companions in the feral spaces represent an integral aspect that requires celebration, and Kailpodh celebrates this animistic hunter-gatherer culture; hence, the Kodava community considers Kailpodh as the ritual of survival.

However, with the advent of European colonisation in Kodagu in the final quarter of the eighteenth century, Kodagu lost its dense mountain forests to colonial coffee plantations. The topographical transformation, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation threatened Kodagu native ecology and their place-based traditional knowledge rooted in place. To survive the cultural and ecological crisis, the Kodava community started practising agriculture as their livelihood instead of hunting-gathering. Gradually, the Kodava community adopted colonial coffee plantation culture. This entirely changed the Kodava human-plant geographies.

CHANGING HUMAN-PLANT GEOGRAPHIES AND VEGETAL POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Tiger Hills narrates the influence of the European colonisers on the Kodava people. Devanna, the dominant male persona trained in a

mission school by a European coloniser ‘often felt there were two parts of himself – Mission-Devanna and Coorg-Devanna’ (Mandanna 2010: 55). Mission-Devanna helped the colonisers to identify native plants, samples of which they arranged to send to the Kew gardens in London (Mandanna 2010: 56–59). Mission-Devanna began to look at plants as a commodity, which can be ‘assigned a value and exchanged’ (Lane 2013, p. 319; Marx and Engels 1988, p. 30). On the other hand, Coorg-Devanna continued his indigenous approach to cherish ‘the sweetness of the nectar that pooled inside the lantana blossoms’ and enjoyed the ‘heat of germinating paddy slush against his bare feet’ (Mandanna 2010: 56). Devanna was aware of the differences between his indigenous-self, rooted in convivial relationship with plants, and the colonised self who identified native plants for the coloniser-ruler to transport to the West. However, under colonial influence, Devanna managed to keep his two halves ‘unquestionably’ separate, not allowing his two selves to ‘encroach into the other’s territory’ (Mandanna 2010: 56).¹³ This foregrounds how the colonial influence powerfully changed the relationship between native plants and people in Kodagu, where people include both indigenous and settler communities. This changing human-plant relationship shakes the moral standing of Kodagu’s indigenous people’s consideration of their plants as kin and more-than-human companions.

Moving in a related direction, *The Scent of Pepper* portrays Thimmu, an indigenous Kodava brought up under colonial influence. The novel depicts how Thimmu inherited the native forests that belonged to his father, Subbu and grandmother, Nanji, only to fell the trees and split them into logs: ‘Trees were being chopped down and flung in a mountainous heap . . . haystacks were on fire ... flames burst in the sky, lighting up the moonless night’ (Nambisan 2010: 262–63). Thimmu represents how the colonial influence changed the mindset of the indigenous Kodava community and their attitude towards their native land and landscape.¹⁴ With the Kodava community considering native plants as commodities, they cleared hundreds of ‘acres of underbrush from beneath their holdings of rosewood, and turn[ed] to coffee’ (Mandanna

13 Devanna represents the colonial mindset of the indigenous Kodava people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

14 I differentiate between land, which has ownership and can be encapsulated with all senses, and landscape, which remains a panoramic way of regarding nature through only the visual senses and cannot be owned.

2010: 222; Nambisan 2010: 261).¹⁵ This shifting attitude of the indigenous Kodava people towards their native vegetation sheds light on how changing human-plant geographies in Kodagu's transformed landscapes reshaped Kodagu's environmental history, society and economy.

Mandanna in the *Tiger Hills* introduces Reverend Gundert, a German coloniser and a 'keen amateur botanist' who came to Mercara in Kodagu 'looking for exotic plants' and was ready to 'pay a fair sum for anything that caught his fancy' (Mandanna 2010: 52). Here, 'exotic' plants refer to Kodagu's native plants such as jasmine (*Jasminum auriculatum*) and sampigé (*Magnolia champaca*). The change in the nomenclature of plants from 'native' to 'exotic' in the transformed Kodava society emphasises the political agency of plants and redefines their plantiness. Subsequently, this leads to political consequences of plant capabilities in more-than-human geographies. More importantly, the multiple identities of plants determine how plants act in transformed landscapes and communities, how the relative plantiness of plants is perceived in transformed space and time and how plants continue to perform in different worlds (Head, Atchison, and Gates 2012: 10, 159–62). For example, soon after the colonisers treated the native jasmine and sampigé as 'exotic' their demands increased, with the indigenous community uprooting 'fiercely coloured orchids, sweet-smelling sampigé and slender shoots of wild jasmine' from their native vegetal landscapes and bringing them to Gundert (Mandanna 2010: 52). This particular act questions the environmental justice of plants and introduces insights from vegetal politics that allow reimagining of plant performances, their subjectivity, life, agency and ethical status. The ethical and environmental justice issues become prominent when, on receiving the native Kodava plants which were 'exotic', Gundert planted some in his missionary garden while shipping most to Kew gardens in London (Mandanna 2010: 52). Moreover, with Gundert expanding his collection of 'indigenous medicinal plants' and sending them to the Kew gardens (Mandanna 2010: 52), the indigenous Kodava plants began to acquire new ecologies in exotic landscapes. This changing of societal landscapes and the effect of colonialism on native plants, their plantiness and the changing human-plant geographies undoubtedly 'typifies people-plant relationships' and connects plant performances to

15 Rosewood (*Dalbergia latifolia*) is native to Kodagu.

vegetal political ecologies (Fleming 2017: 26, 31). The native plants that once defined the Kodava lifeway in pre-colonial Kodagu soon crossed normative nomenclatures, territorial borders and taxonomic boundaries and became 'exotic' in Kodagu's white settler colony, gaining a new identity, life, nature, culture, environment and subjectivity.

Within the domain of more-than-human scholarship, the displacement and reorientation of plants within their native landscapes after colonisation raises serious questions of ethical responsibilities and environmental justice. This became more prominent when the colonisers considered them 'unwanted' after sending samples to London and cleared the native Kodava vegetation to plant the non-native cash crop, coffee.¹⁶ In Western practices, more-than-humans 'are generally relegated to the background, tolerated only on human terms and in their proper places' (Rose and Van Dooren 2012: 16). We find a similar attitude towards Kodava native plants within Kodagu's transformed colonial society. The native plants, such as rajakirita and narvisha, experienced continued disorientation and shifting identities. Along with the white settlers, the Kodava people began to consider their native plants 'unwanted' and cleared native vegetation to plant non-native coffee. *The Scent of Pepper* narrates how the Kodava indigenous community started acquiring huge coffee plantations. Rao Bahadur Madaiah, Nanji's father-in-law and Kodava community elder, purchased 'one hundred and twelve acres of newly-planted coffee and five thousand battis of land in Athur' from a European coloniser in the late nineteenth century for his son Baliyanna, Nanji's husband (Nambisan 2010:10). Purchasing colonial plantations from the British planters in Kodagu became a new trend in colonial Kodagu. Nanji's son Subbu attempted to make a deal to purchase a 'two-hundred-acre estate with a bungalow' from Edward Rice, who was leaving Kodagu to return to England (Nambisan 2010: 242). These passages illustrate how coffee,

16 Coffee was introduced to Kodagu from Ceylon, present day Sri Lanka. Since the mid-seventeenth century, Ceylon had been the top coffee-growing country on earth. From 1872, Ceylon's coffee production seriously declined because of the leaf rust disease caused by fungus *Hemileia vastatrix*. After Ceylon's coffee production stopped in 1879, the European colonisers were searching for an alternative. They found Kodagu's dark-soiled mountainous region at an elevation of about 1,800 feet above sea level an ideal alternative to Ceylon. For a more comprehensive colonial history of the coffee plantations in India and Ceylon, see Lewis 1909, McCook 2006, Mendis 2005, Perry 1855, Richter 1870, Thurston 1913, Wenzlhuemer 2008.

the new economic crop introduced by the European colonisers, changed the attitude of the Kodava people toward their native vegetation and colonised the Kodagu landscape and culture.

James Ellis rightly observes that plants ‘first colonised the planet’ (2019: xiii). Kodagu shares a similar history, with the introduction of non-native coffee into Kodagu’s landscape. The coffee plant gained power because of its material performance and gradually colonised Kodagu’s land and landscape, threatening Kodagu’s indigenous nature and culture. Since the late nineteenth century, the material performance of the non-native coffee in Kodagu enforced both indigenous and colonial ways of perceiving Kodagu’s pre-colonial native vegetation as a lower form of being, often identifying them as ‘unwanted’ and ‘weeds’. A plant ‘growing out of place’ and ‘growing wild’ is called a weed (Campbell 1923: 50; Harlan 1992: 85). Weeds are traditionally ‘regarded as cumbering the ground or hindering the growth of superior vegetation’ (Harlan 1992: 85). In colonial Kodava society, the coffee plant broke indigenous human-plant relationships and established concrete capitalist ways of relating to plants whose material performances assured profit. This defined Kodagu’s changed communal relationship to their land, determined empirical methods of capitalising plants and undermined all native vegetation as weeds or unwanted.

Before colonisation, the Kodava rituals, paddy fields and forests were more-than-human multispecies spaces and sites of convivial worldmaking. With the burning of native forests to create colonial monoculture coffee plantations, the convivial spaces were lost. This resulted in the remaining native plants, such as the sacred rajakirita, becoming *unwanted weeds* that would threaten the new economic performer of the region, coffee. This colonial practice of identifying the native rajakirita as an unwanted invasive weed threatened the traditional ceremony of Kailpodh, making it a forgotten ritual for the hunter-gatherer community.¹⁷ Rajakirita became an invasive weed because its material performance could not be capitalised and it interrupted coffee monocultures. Weeds are often considered invasive and botanical thinking encourages controlled growth of invasive plant species. Following the same line of thought, the colonisers controlled Kodagu’s long cherished rajakirita, which led rajakirita to

17 For a detailed environmental history and ethnographic survey of Kodagu in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Thurston 1913.

gradually disappear from Kodagu's landscape towards the late nineteenth century (Machaia, personal conversation; Richter 1870; Thurston 1913). From the perspective of vegetal political ecology, the social change in the Kodava society was so potentially entangled in the environmental politics of human-plant geographies that, in Kodagu, it becomes pertinent to understand the vegetal political ecology of plants synonymously with multispecies ethnography and bioregionalism. The following section will investigate how the Kodava indigenous people used their indigenous knowledge systems to decolonise the vegetal politics of Kodagu's coffee plantations and revive their nature-culture relationship.

BIOREGIONAL POSSIBILITIES AND CONVIVIAL WORLDMAKING IN KODAGU

'Bioregion' refers to 'the geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness – to a place and the ideas that have developed' about how to live in a place (Berg and Dasmann 1978: 218). Geographically, a bioregion is a 'separate whole' with distinct 'climatology, physiography, animal and plant geography, natural history, and other descriptive natural sciences' (Berg 1978; Berg and Dasmann 1978: 218). Kodagu's wet climate, colonial history of coffee plantations, black alluvial soil, native biodiversity, mountainous topography, indigenous community and distinctive cultural practices make it a bioregion. Living-in-place and reinhabitation are fundamental bioregional concepts for practicing bioregional culture. The changing human-plant geographies in Kodagu with the advent of coffee turned it into an injured land.¹⁸ Prominent bioregional scholars such as Berg and Dasmann (1978), Gary Snyder (1990, 1995), Stephanie Mills (1995), Michael V. McGinnis (1999), Kirkpatrick Sale (2000) and Robert Thayer (2003) argue that bioregional reinhabitation helps in restoring the injured land/bioregion and reviving the lost nature and culture of the place by developing a bioregional lifeway.¹⁹ Here,

18 Extensive human exploitation leading to topographical changes that threaten the native ecosystem of the place and cause an immense loss of biodiversity makes a land injured; see Berg and Dasmann 1978.

19 All the inhabitants of the bioregion, including both the indigenous people and the settler community, can practice reinhabitation and live a bioregional lifeway. However, in Kodagu, even today, only the indigenous Kodava people inhabit their land.

the adjective ‘bioregional’ refers to the ‘intellectually rich and culturally diverse way of thinking [about] and living’ an ecological lifeway rooted in the bioregion (McGinnis 1999: 1–3; Snyder 2013: 44). In this section, I investigate the bioregional possibilities in colonial/post-colonial Kodagu (1920–2016) and argue that the Kodava community reinhabit Kodagu to re-establish their human-plant relationships and revive the nature-culture of the place.

The continuous cultivation of monoculture coffee continued until the Kodava people realised how the drastic ecological imbalances threatened their indigenous culture. To counter the severe ecological crisis and restore their ‘natureculture’ (Haraway 2004: 210) relationships, the Kodava people began to reinhabit their ancestral land by growing coffee under native shade trees such as orange, mango and jackfruit (Mandanna 2010: 223–252; Nambisan 2010, 35–48). This became a significant turning point in the environmental history of Kodagu because it restricted the adverse effects of land-use changes, restored the bioregion’s lost ecology, maintained the topsoil that enables long-term survival, and provided the resources of native crops and other ingredients for daily survival (De 2022b: 42). This particular indigenous knowledge helped the community to revive their native ecosystem and facilitate the return of native vegetation to Kodagu’s colonial plantations, turning them into mini forests. Bioregional reinhabitation in Kodagu thereby undoes Western thought and practice and once again connects ‘people, plants and places’ (Tsing 2012: 145) in colonial and post-colonial Kodagu. This not only makes native plants agents of revival but also transforms the non-native coffee into a bioregional crop in Kodagu.

Focusing on the agency of crop plants, it is crucial to understand that reinhabitation in Kodagu encourages convivial worldmaking in maintaining ecological sustainability while simultaneously growing coffee along with native crops. This indigenous creative ecology once again changed the attitude of the Kodava people towards more-than-humans. In *Tiger Hills*, Devi, the dominant female persona, proclaims that she knows the histories of [Kodagu’s] trees’ even ‘before they were rooted to the ground’ (Mandanna 2010: 53). Again, in *The Scent of Pepper* ‘the sound of the trees being split into logs’ felt like ‘bleeding wood’ to Subbu (Nambisan 2010: 262). This shows that, due to reinhabitation, the agency of plants in Kodagu once more reshaped

the indigenous community's existence and culture, which is founded on convivial worldmaking. I argue elsewhere (De 2023) that this indigenous approach is bioregional and call it 'decolonial reinhabitation' because the indigenous Kodava people undo Western practices on their plantations to reinhabit their ancestral land and re-establish lost human-plant relationship.²⁰

Decolonial reinhabitation in Kodagu caused *rajakirita* to naturally return to Kodagu's landscape, reviving *Kailpodh*. The Kodava people then ritualised *rajakirita* and created sacred groves on their plantations to protect native *rajakirita*. *Rajakirita*, thus, becomes the social agent of revival and reconnection. Ritualising plants as 'sacred' from being 'unwanted weeds' once again transformed the plantiness of *rajakirita* and changed the dynamics of the Kodava human-plant relationship. Hence, I observe the ritualising of *rajakirita* as a crucial decolonial reinhabitory strategy. Here, the native plant becomes a bioregional agent to undo western plantation science and employ Kodava indigenous knowledge on Kodagu's transformed landscapes. In this way, sacred groves on Kodagu's coffee plantations reintroduced native functional biodiversity in Kodagu within a hundred years (from around 1915 to 2016). This reinhabitory practice of ritualising and preserving native plant species is what Kate Rigby refers to as a significant 'cultural shift to resituate humankind ecologically' (2018: 73). Again, the Australian ecophilosopher Val Plumwood understands similar reinhabitory practices as 'cultural practices of "deep sustainability"' (2009). In reinhabiting Kodagu and reviving the convivial relationship with the more-than-humans on colonial sites of western plantations, *Kailpodh* was reintroduced to post-colonial Kodagu.²¹

20 I coined the term 'decolonial reinhabitation' and argue that bioregional reinhabitation in Kodagu is decolonial. To understand why reinhabitation in Kodagu is decolonial and not postcolonial, see De 2023.

21 In post-colonial Kodagu, *Kailpodh* continues to be celebrated. Though hunting is banned in post-colonial India, Kodava people still go for forest walks on the coffee plantations which are now mini forests housing diverse native vegetation and sacred groves. Instead of hunting, a coconut is shot to mark the commencement of the traditional hunting season, followed by a traditional meal prepared with fruits and vegetables collected from the coffee forests and sacred groves.

CONCLUSION

Within transformed Kodava society, rajakirita enters multiple spaces. Before colonisation, rajakirita was 'native'. In colonial Kodava society, rajakirita became an unwanted invasive weed. On reinhabiting Kodagu by undoing Western practices and turning coffee plantations into native forests, rajakirita naturally returned to Kodagu and was ritualised and recognised as 'sacred'. Unpacking rajakirita as native, invasive, weed and then sacred reveals the power of the vegetal politics of plants based on their plantiness and how they construct landscapes, society, culture and environmental narratives. John Charles Ryan rightly observes how 'plants constitute certain social practices and customs as well as the ethics surrounding them' (2012: 104). The transition of rajakirita and coffee across time and space illuminates how plants feature in different indigenous, colonial and post-colonial settings and evolve as essential players in human social life.

More importantly, the material performances of individual plants in Kodagu show how a flowering plant (rajakirita) and a crop plant (coffee) become entangled in the more-than-human social life and earn the power to affect, displace and transform landscapes and cultures while contributing fundamentally in shaping cultures and societies around them. In this regard, bioregional concepts of living-in-place and reinhabitation serve as vital practical solutions to understand human-plant ethnographies, mediate human-plant entanglements and inspire vegetal politics to break down hegemonic plant performances and re-establish convivial worldmaking to encourage cultural production for deep sustainability. In indigenous environments of crisis such as Kodagu, decolonial reinhabitation becomes the appropriate approach to collectively identify and represent the humans and the more-than-humans as 'we', strongly asserting the value of convivial worldmaking including the more-than-human world.

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