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The problem of the introduction of Adansonia digitata into India

The subject-matter of this paper relates to a period considerably later than that of most of the others presented here. But, as an archaeologist working in a comparatively late historical period, I welcome the opportunity to demonstrate that identity of interest, and *a fortiori* of approach, may occur when purely historical documents fail. The period primarily concerned, the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, is well documented for political history and for the development of religion, and the main features of the cultural and social institutions of both the autochthones and the foreign ruling classes are clear. But this documentary evidence can do little more than provide a general background to my problem, which seems to have some connexion with a foreign menial class about whom all information (save their occasional involvement in political history) is scanty in the extreme.

The baobab, *Adansonia digitata*, is commonly "not supposed to be a native", says Nairne¹, although the family Bombaceae is well represented in India by other genera. Hooker² is more specific: the baobab, says he, is "a native of Africa, not truly wild in India", and in giving its distribution as "tropical Africa" he mentions that it is "cultivated in various parts of India and Ceylon". But here "cultivated" must be interpreted with caution: the tree has certainly been planted, as a specimen, in the botanical gardens of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, presumably under British direction; and there seem to have been older plantings around Delhi and Allāhābād which may be attributed to the Mughal taste for *curiosa* around the end of the sixteenth century. I can find no other evidence of its deliberate planting in modern times. We can, however, be a little more precise concerning its Indian distribution: Birdwood³ notes it as "generally found most abundant about the old ports frequented by the early Mahommedan traders", and it has indeed been reported as growing in and around Janjīrā, Chaul and Sūrat, all towns which would fall into this category. It does however also occur inland: where it is found in any numbers (apart from the specimen trees already mentioned) its greatest concentrations appear to be in Bidar and Bījāpur in the Deccan; in Burhānpur in the former principality of Khandēsh; and above all in

Fig 1 Location of places mentioned in the text.

Mālwa, in the towns of Chandēri and Māṇḍū and its suburb Na'lcha. All of these places (see Fig. 1) were towns of some importance under the mediaeval Muslim sultanates.

The baobab's onomastic status is suggestive. In Mālwa it is known as *Ḳhurāsāni imlī*, in Bījāpur as *Gōrakh imlī*, in both cases taking part of its name from the Tamarind, the true *imlī*. The confusion is already found in c. 1595 in Abu'l-Faẓl's description of Mālwa⁴: "here the tamarind grows as large as a coconut, and its fruit is extremely white". I can imagine no two trees less likely to be confused from the appearance of stem, leaf or fruit; perhaps the common feature of a fruit with an acid pulp is responsible for the baobab's sobriquet. The epithet *Ḳhurāsāni* is fanciful, for the tree is unknown in *Ḳhurāsān*; it seems to be no more than an elegant word meaning "foreign", as in *American cloth*, *Russian salad*; and I can find no reason for the Deccan association with *Gōrakh* (= *Gorakṣanātha*, the patron saint of an order of yogīs) unless there may be some association with death, for here the baobab was traditionally the tree under which executions took place (why? from its being merely an easy landmark for a rendezvous, or because its leaflessness all the year, except for the rains, suggested also lifelessness?). The tree cannot be identified in any old Indian flora, and appears to have no Sanskrit name. Such negative linguistic evidence is of course inconclusive by itself,

but it does seem to support the suggestion of an introduction in Islamic times.

If, then, we assume that the baobab is an introduced species, the questions which arise are three: (a) when was it brought in? (b) for what purpose? (c) by what means? The date I shall refer to later; but we may observe here that local tradition in Māṇḍū⁵ supposes it to have been brought in to the area under Maḥmūd Khaljī (1436–69). As to the means, Birdwood suggests that it was either introduced by traders or carried across the Indian Ocean by currents and winds, as certainly happened with *Kigelia pinnata*; but perhaps militating against this latter suggestion is the apparent reluctance of the baobab to regenerate naturally, even though the fruit germinates readily when planted. And even if the fruit had arrived on the Indian shore by such an accident, its transfer some 400 km. inland to the Mālwa plateau can only have been effected by man.

The last question, for what purpose it was introduced, is more puzzling. The tree now appears to have little value to man in India (even its natural role as an inherently comic vegetable seems to be little appreciated), although it appears somewhat surprisingly⁶ as one of the possible crude materials of paper manufacture. I suspect that this happened merely because the tree happened to be there; in any case if the early fifteenth-century introduction can be supported, paper-making could not have been the prime purpose on chronological grounds. I have found no evidence of its hollow trunks being used as receptacles for water storage, as happens in certain African areas; and in any case this would seem pointless in such a region as Mālwa, where surface water is not hard to find. Nor is there any evidence, as far as I am aware, for the use of the hollow trunks for burial purposes, also reported from parts of Africa. I have seen deer feeding on its fallen petals, but I know of no instance of the petals being collected as cattle fodder (as with *Bombax*, for example), nor yet for use in dyeing, as with a variety of Indian trees. The only reference to other uses are of its fruits being “made into a refreshing sherbet by Muslim women” in the Deccan⁷.

A clue to its date and an adumbration of its connexion with a particular class may be forthcoming from the fact that its distribution coincides strikingly with those areas under Muslim control (Mālwa, Khāndēsh, the Deccan, the western ports) where Ḥabshīs were settled in considerable numbers. The term Ḥabshī, literally “Abyssinian”, refers in early Islam to slaves of Abyssinian origin, but in India is applied to African slaves of other races, Bantu and Somali, imported from the Horn of Africa⁸. The evidence for a total terrestrial correspondence is incomplete, as information is lacking on the baobab in other Ḥabshī-colonized areas: Bengal, Jawnpur, Aḥmadnagar, Āsirgarh. Even so, the coincidence is suggestive, and if we may thus associate the baobab with the Ḥabshīs we are given a *terminus a quo*: while there is some evidence for Ḥabshī slaves in north India as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century, the great period of their expansion all over India was the

fourteenth; for example, the traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa⁹ comments on their presence from north India to Ceylon on his journeys made between 1333 and 1342, as guards and men-at-arms on land and sea. There is evidence that they were in Gujarāt in large numbers in the mid-fourteenth century, and well established in the Deccan at the time of Fērōz Shāh Bahmanī (1397-1422). The island of Janjira was a Ḥabshī possession from the early sixteenth century, although Ḥabshīs had long before that been prominent in the Muslim navies on the west coast of India. For Mālwa there is no definite evidence of their presence before the time of Mahmud Khālji, although they are known to have been employed at the court in his and his son's reigns to the tune of thousands. This adds weight to the Māṇḍū tradition reported above.

If, as seems possible, there is a connection between the baobab and the Ḥabshīs, the African tree and the African people, a powerful reason for the tree's introduction is still wanting. A slave people would hardly introduce it as a specimen to remind them of home; the craving for a "refreshing sherbet" is hardly convincing, as India is well provided with other natural resources for such purposes (the modern instance of a powerful Western nation who have been unable to sustain their existence overseas without a revolting sherbet made from the stimulant *coca* and *cola* plants is scarcely an exact parallel; fourteenth-century transport problems, especially for a slave people, are not comparable with our own). It does seem possible, however, that its importation for a cult purpose might have been permitted. What such a cult purpose might have been does not seem possible to say; colleagues at the School of Oriental and African studies concerned with African anthropology have not yet been able to throw any light on possible baobab cults in east Africa or along the coast¹⁰.

It is obvious that more work needs to be done on the baobab and its attendant problems. There has been no investigation of the age of the Indian baobabs; although I understand that the Indian specimens, imposing though many of them be, do not approach the African ones in size. More work needs to be done on defining the distribution of the Indian baobabs. As I have shown, I fear only too clearly, there is need for more investigation, if the data are still ascertainable, on the anthropological side.

Notes

- 1 Nairne, A. K. (n.d.). *Flowering Plants of Western India*. London. s.v.
- 2 Hooker, J. D. (1872-5). *Flora of British India*, 1. London. p. 348.
- 3 Birdwood, C. (1886). Communication to Yule, H. (ed.) *Hobson-Jobson*. London. s.v. *Monkey-bread tree* (this name, however, is not used in India).
- 4 Abu'l-Fazl (c. 1596). *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, 2. (ed. Bibl. Ind.). p. 197.
- 5 Yazdani, Gh. (1929). *Mandu: the City of Joy*. Oxford. p. 2.
- 6 Watt, G. (1908). *Commercial Products of India*. London. p. 868.
- 7 Cousens, H. (1916). *Bijāpur and its Architectural Remains*. Bombay. p. 57.

- 8 For their history in India, see Burton-Page, J. (1965). "Ĥabṣhī", art, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 2nd edition, 3. pp. 14-16.
- 9 Defrémery, C. and Sanguinetti, B. R. (1853-8). (eds.) *Voyages d'Ibn Batouta*, 4 (Arabic text and French trans.). Paris. pp. 31, 59-60, 93 and 185.
- 10 My thanks are due to Professor P. H. Gulliver and Dr. D. J. Parkin for allowing me to pester them with questions of Adansoniology.

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