1998

Putting down roots: colony as plantation

Paul Sharrad

University of Wollongong, psharrad@uow.edu.au

Publication Details
Putting down roots: colony as plantation

Abstract
Most references to the Banyan tree (ficus bengaliensis) cite the huge specimen in the Calcutta Botanical Gardens (e.g. Britannica 137). This mix of botany as a sign of indigenous identity (rootedness) and western science (Linnean taxonomy) with urban civic space (Botanical Garden) constructed during the colonial era takes on other discursive appurtenances. The rootedness of trees also jostles with travel, nature with trade. The great-rooted fig apparently got its English name from being encountered first in Persia as a place where Indian merchants (banias) met to do business. Apart from this diasporic aspect, though, in India, the tree is frequently seen as the home of local spirits and deities, and is often the central shady spot where priests and teachers instruct village youth where nature meets culture (Encarta; Century 440)

In Honolulu, there is another banyan in the Zoological Gardens. There is also one amid the weekend craft fairs in a downtown park commemorating restoration of power to the Hawaiian Monarchy in 1843 by a British Admiral anxious to keep this Pacific cross-roads open to trade after, amongst other concerns, a dispute with the French over proselytising rights for Catholic missionaries (Barclay 88, 90).

This paper, then, is about trees, trade, travel, colonial power, the botanical civilising of a landscape, religion, knowledge.

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/660
Paul Sharrad

Putting Down Roots: Colony as Plantation

I

Most references to the Banyan tree (*Ficus bengalensis*) cite the huge specimen in the Calcutta Botanical Gardens (e.g. *Britannica* 137). This mix of botany as a sign of indigenous identity (rootedness) and western science (Linnean taxonomy) with urban civic space (Botanical Garden) constructed during the colonial era takes on other discursive appurtenances. The rootedness of trees also jostles with travel, nature with trade. The great-rooted fig apparently got its English name from being encountered first in Persia as a place where Indian merchants (banias) met to do business. Apart from this diasporic aspect, though, in India, the tree is frequently seen as the home of local spirits and deities, and is often the central shady spot where priests and teachers instruct village youth — where nature meets culture (Encarta; *Century* 440).

In Honolulu, there is another banyan in the Zoological Gardens. There is also one amid the weekend craft fairs in a downtown park commemorating restoration of power to the Hawaiian Monarchy in 1843 by a British Admiral anxious to keep this Pacific cross-roads open to trade after, amongst other concerns, a dispute with the French over proselytising rights for Catholic missionaries (Barclay 88, 90).

This paper, then, is about trees, trade, travel, colonial power, the botanical civilising of a landscape, religion, knowledge.

II

Since at least the foundation of Virginia (1607) and the settlement of English (1583-) and Protestant Scots (1649-) in Catholic Ireland, the word “plantation” in English has been attached to colonial and imperialist ventures: the transplanting of people and the large-scale cultivation of primary produce. Mary Louise Pratt has clearly demonstrated the interactions of colonial expansion and the Enlightenment drive to encyclopedic knowledge that collected and classified, then cultivated and traded plants from all over the globe. Often one of the first things a settler colony did as a public sign of material promise and a mark of civilisation taking root in the wilderness was to establish agricultural shows. John Buchan's swashbuckling tale of putting down a native rebellion founded on an indigenist syncretic cult of Prester John (and plundering a large treasure in the process) is also one of converting a wild landscape of nomadic cattle herders into a tame farming land of sheep, fruit, meallees, cotton, rubber, and tobacco (Buchan 283-84). The local plantations, of course, were matched by great exhibitions of imperial trade and collection in European metropoles.

Buchan closes his vision of an African plantation with a quotation from the Bible: “the wilderness and the solitary place are glad for us [and will] blossom like the rose.” While there were periods and regions of trade operating outside of Europe’s expansionist enterprise and Christian discourse, this kind of language became associated with English imperial texts during the evangelical expansionism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The governing concept was one of “dissemination”: the parable of the mustard seed; the parable of the sower. The tellingly dualistic name of the British and Foreign Bible Society, created in 1804 and multi-denominational (Neill 400), took as its logo a picture of a farmer hand-broadcasting seed. (Admittedly this was an attempt at Biblical historicism, but it also hints at colonial desire in that it signifies simultaneously the agrarian “paradise” and the technological lack of a “third world,” compared to an increasingly mechanised Britain.) Using the same metaphors, the Anglican Bishop of Calcutta, writing to Baptist missionary William Carey noted hopefully that “if a reunion of our churches could be effected, the harvest of the heathen would ere long be reaped” (Neill 228). Father Navarre, seeking to establish a Sacred Heart Mission in New Britain, uses similar, if less ecumenistic, language: “Assuredly, I may conclude that the harvest is ripe and merely awaits labourers. ... I cannot silence my grief, not to say vexation, when I realize that teachers and ministers of error have taken possession of the fruitful soil before us.” (Whitaker 385). London Missionary Society directors writing to Rev. Charles Pitman in the Cook Islands in 1835 note with pleasure “a new station planted at Titekanea” (LMS). In one of the very few secular texts circulated and translated within the Protestant missions’ outreach, we can see an early instance of the link between agriculture and the civilising mission of colonialism. Robinson Crusoe, in between reading

SPAN: 46, April 1998
the Bible, propagates his salvaged grain and cultivates his "plantations" until he has a harvest sufficient to store, and generate a supply of bread (Defoe 78-79, 86-92, 112).

If you consult the index of *A History of Christian Missions* you will find an extensive list of people and places. Nowhere will you see "money," "economics," "trade," or "agriculture." Yet the globalising industry of ideas and values that the missions under imperialist expansion represented was bound up in its discourse and practice with all of these terms — perhaps the last in particular. Missions planted people all over the world; they cultivated converts as seedlings that would grow to propagate larger crops of the saved and the civilised. Mrs Collins, a missionary wife in South India, wrote a novel, *The Slayer Slain* (1864-66) to sow reformist ideas in Hindu women. Decorating its didactic plot with local scenery, she preaches the domestication of the forest as part of the conversion of the soul:

while we gaze and admire the festoons of the climbing yam, or the massive vegetation that overtops that chana, one cannot but regret that the gay and lovely flowers which adorn and beautify the homes of the bulky elephant and creep round the den of the fierce tiger find no fostering hand of man. The lovely purple blossoms of the Kakapoo or the large pure white of the *Manda walli* seldom met with a gentle hand to transplant them from the wilds of the jungle. Oh! why not, ye mothers and daughters of India, transplant some of these gems of nature to your cottage doors ... (Mukherjee 23)

III

Spreading the Word/seed entailed spreading the technology of how to read and write and disseminate it (Neill 194-05). The ship that took the London Missionary Society evangelists into the Pacific in 1796 was named *The Duff* a Scots family name, one of whose owners, Alexander, later led the development of schooling in Calcutta which eventually produced Calcutta University (Neill 216). Missions meant schools; schools meant resources. And, like every subsidised colonial activity, support for the missions by the "non-foreigners" in Britain who collected and saved on their behalf wanted a return on its investment. This it received in lurid tales of heathen superstition and brutality being conquered through love, sacrifice, and fortitude with returns in an ever-escalating harvest of souls. It also received a secular recompense from hundreds of missionary linguists, ethnologists, medical researchers, zoologists, and botanists filling the imperial archive. (The LMS Directors exhorted missionaries in Tahiti, like Rev George Stallworthy in October 1835, to send accurate statistics on anything that might be of use: map bearings, observations of natural history, customs, products etc. Lett) But it also increasingly sought supplementation through converts becoming self-supporting within their new dispensation (The LMS annual report, 1911, declares its policy of self-support, self-government and self-propagation, 281). And so the global corporation of Christendom entered the multinational enterprise of Empire:

Missions have run farms and agricultural institutions. They have developed industrial schools and taught every kind of handicraft. They have run printing presses and publishing houses — the standard of work of the Methodist Press at Mysore was so high that for many years the Oxford University Press cut its costs by having many books printed in India. There was hardly an area of human activity that was not pressed into the service of the Gospel. (Neill 217)

Indeed, the beginnings of Christianity in the Pacific were a blend of innocent idealism, survival techniques and worldly calculation. The Captain of the *Duff* gave his services gratis but picked up a cargo of tea on the way home to return £4100 to his principals. One destitute missionary in Tahiti took his stipend in calico which he traded at profit to locals for food, others tried growing cotton, sugar, and tobacco for export, and they are reported to have traded arms to King Pomare so as to secure a political base for conversions (Beeching 90; Garrett 29-30).

Missionaries were both scorned and respected by their more materialist colonising fellows. In India they were kept out for fear their proselytising would spoil local tempers and therefore trade, but they were also seen as being of little practical use. This clearly proved not to be the case in general, but on the frontiers of the wilder Pacific, they tried to protect their flocks from the more excessive ravages of exploitation and violence, and were at odds with "free trade" commercialism as a result. In Papua, James Chalmers opposed white settlement; he allowed a British Protectorate but feared an Australian colony that would push native interests aside (Langmore 50-51). Nonetheless, missionaries, including Chalmers, were also used as civilisational shock troops to soften up savages, making the jungle and desert a safe place for incursions
by miners, traders, and farmers. Chalmers himself began his contacts with tribes by trading hoop-iron, tomahawks, cloth, and tobacco, for which he was criticised by less pragmatic colleagues (Langmore 5-7, 13, 32). He also, by his explorations and correspondence with newspapers in Queensland, attracted white incursions which then caught him up in dispute resolution. (Langmore 38-39). Other missionaries, like Methodists George Brown and his colleague Dunks actively encouraged the right sort of trader to open up plantations (Whitaker 390, 395). Brown details plans for a mission voyage taking Islander pastors to New Guinea paying for itself through loading trade cargo (Whitaker 364). The ambiguous status of missionaries is reflected in R.M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* — catalogues of tyranny, cannibalism, and infanticide are compared with the evil of piratical labour recruiters (who are worse because they should know better); these white blackguards mock a shipload of native catechists wearing a motley assortment of European clothes and speaking like “nigger minstrels,” but treat them decently, for, says one,

The Captain cares as much for the Gospel as you do (an’ that’s precious little), but he knows and everyone knows, that the only place among the southern islands where a ship can put in and get what she wants in comfort is where the Gospel has been sent to. ... The South Sea Islanders are such incarnate fiends that they are the better of being tamed, and the missionaries are the only men who can do it.” (Ballantyne 213-15)

These Karotongans are carrying pigs, cats (as it turns out, to quell a rat plague on the islands), the Gospel, and “two tons cocoa-nuts” (212). Their agricultural efforts are reflected in the description of an LMS missionary settlement visited later in the book:

The cottages stood several hundred yards from the beach, and were protected from the glare of the sea by the rich foliage of rows of large Barringtonia and other trees which girt the shore. The village was about a mile in length, and perfectly straight, with a wide road down the middle, on either side of which were rows of the tufted-topped ti tree, whose delicate and beautiful blossoms, hanging beneath their plume-crested tops, added richness to the scene. The cottages of the natives were built beneath these trees, and were kept in the most excellent order, each having a little garden in front, tastefully laid out and planted, while the walks were covered with black and white pebbles. (288)

Ballantyne is not to be trusted as a botanist, and his picture is fancifully taken from engravings in mission propaganda, but the general semiotic correspondence between Christianity, colonial civic order, and the plantation is clear.

James Chalmers, like Ballantyne, protested against the piratical “blackbirding” labour trade (Langmore 40-41) which underpinned Pacific plantation agriculture. But he was, despite his criticism of it, part of a “plantation industry” that uprooted native pastors and catechists, transplanting them around the Pacific on much lower stipends than their white supervisors (Langmore 16-17; Howe 117-18). During his work amongst the Suau, twenty-five Rarotongan teachers and some of their families died (Langmore 25). Chalmers also, in advocating a form of government recognising New Guinean rights and lifestyle, argued that

Officers should be appointed in every district to rule through native chiefs and to enforce the cultivation of plantations. ...

“Teach our natives, encourage them in trade, and they will never want your charity.” (Langmore 45).

Nomads themselves, missionaries worked towards settlement — sowing, planting. Hero pioneers like Chalmers never became commercial managers, but the pastors they scattered along the coasts and up the mountain ridges had to maintain schools and training colleges and feed themselves and often their students as well. Surplus time and labour resulting from pacification allowed villagers to be pressed into providing surplus crops to support a pastor or a school (Vincent Eri’s novel *The Crocodile* shows LMS children having to work in gardens during school hours to feed their pastor-teachers, 7). New food items and/or systems of cultivation were introduced. An early attempt at settlement, “New Albion” sponsored by British Indian merchants records food and trade plants growing in New Guinea and notes its own planting of yams, French beans, and onions (Whitaker 248). Eri notes in passing that Samoan pastors imported their own kind of breadfruit trees (Eri 6); rice was farmed in the Catholic Mekee area; Methodists ran an agricultural school in the Trobriands (Waiko 66-7). The feature film *Tukana* shows a mission school training boys who grow up to farm cacao on Bougainville (Owen and Toro). Some of these crops were exploitable in the markets of Port Moresby,
Salama, and other growing towns; most went to entrepreneurial shippers like Bums Philp or Godfrey’s for selling on to raise funds for mission materials and salaries. In Samoa, the Maeha theological college also taught crafts and traded plants with Singapore and Ceylon to build experimental farms of arrowroot, sweetcorn, groundnut, pepper, cinnamon, rubber, coffee, cotton, and vanilla (LMS annual report, 1901, 308). The other side of the colony as plantation can be seen in Trevor Shearston’s novel Sticks that Kill. Set around the period of Chalmer’s death in 1901, it notes the experimental introduction of coffee to Papua New Guinea and the push to acquire land for rubber plantations (41, 43). It also records the replanting of dry Port Moresby as a Western civic site. Tamarinds are growing by the gaol, mangoes are being watered as an avenue along the main street, frangipanis by the church, and like Buchan’s Africa, the desert is blossoming as the rose — along with poppies, jasmine and a potted cactus — in a woman’s front garden (68-71). What is of interest is that a couple of civil servants operating as amateur horticulturalists are getting help in their labours from the inmates of the town gaol: natives doing time, among other things, for not paying their taxes — which meant not taking part in planting cash crops (Waiko 74-75).

This “civilising mission” of planting people and crops, was regarded with suspicion by some for destroying the “romance” of colonial life (and for leading the natives into competition with white planters). Robert J.A.G. Fletcher, writing under his pen-name of “Asterisk” about plantation life in the New Hebrides, observed, “I don’t know... that anyone has written about the Kanaka labourer and coconut planting. Most of the written yarns are about traders” (Asterisk 56). A page earlier he provides his own answer to his implied question: the sheer repetitive slog of running a labour line and maintaining agricultural routine. This domestication and disciplining of warrior energies in orderly plantation settlements was crucial to sowers of a civilising gospel, religious and secular alike. However, although the official introduction of a plantation economy to Papua by the British administrator McGregor in 1891 (to fund public works through taxes) set a ten-mile limit on the recruitment of workers in order to prevent the coercive transplanting of people such as occurred for the canefields of Fiji and Australia, the system under Hubert Murray became much more open (Waiko 35, 67-70), and the push to planting actually promoted an uprooting, the indenture system generating an itinerant labour force of mixed tribal groups and a growing body of accountants and clerks trained in mission schools. We can see in Rextord Orotoló’s semi-autobiographical novel from the Solomon Islands, Two Times Resurrection, the intertwining of the Christian language of self-improvement, the pursuit of education, and the travelling around with occasional paid work on plantations that was necessary to obtain it. John Kadiba’s essay “Growing up in Mailu” also shows the movement, both physical and cultural, that went on between his village, the Keitiaki rubber plantation and the missions. (Beier 3-17). The extent to which McGregor’s coconut groves entered into island life is reflected in a poem by Jacob Simet. Here, the natural signifier of local identity (Matupit volcano in Rabaul) is subordinated to an image of agricultural industry:

In the morning she awakes like a copra dryer.
She starts to give out her white smoke and makes the air drier.
Her sulphuric smell fills up the atmosphere:
you think it’s horrible
I think it’s lovely. (“Matupit Volcano,” Beier 69)

This plantation enterprise also implicated the missions in the kind of discriminations their ideals sought to counter. Asterisk, with anti-puritan prejudice, damns his Presbyterian neighbours in the New Hebrides: “These missionaries are just like kings to the natives. They pinch all their copra and all their land, and forbid them to trade with anyone else” (29). Sixty years later, in New Guinea, Leo Hannet records his “Disillusionment with the Priesthood,” commenting:

The mission was placed in the middle of a large plantation and frequently I was sent to do adult education among the labourers. But I found it very hard to talk to them about the kindness of God, when I saw how badly they were treated and how poorly they were paid. In fact the labourers on the mission plantation were no better off than the workers on the private plantations. (Beier 44)

Converters of savages into potential citizens, missionaries were seen as rather too close to the natives by racist exploiters who wanted ignorant savages without their savagery. Missionaries preached the afterlife, but they had to
apply themselves the necessities of this one, both resisting and promoting the encroachments of a modern capitalist world. In moving the imaginations of villagers into a global space, they laid the seeds for nations, while struggling to maintain a paternalistic control. And in being part of the practical and discursive system that inserted their charges into a plantation economy, they left, willy nilly, a legacy of economic dependency which they originally sought to avoid. This, of course, is not entirely their doing: secular colonial economics also spurred on plantation agriculture on a much larger scale (especially on the New Guinea side, run as a commercial enterprise by the Germans for thirty years, Waiko 41). But there was a clear overlap in the validating discourses of imperialist expansion and a complicity in practice between the cultivation and dissemination of souls and of plants.

IV
These clear evidences in the contradictions and interconnections of mission and plantation relate to Homi Bhabha’s notions of splitting and contradiction in the colonial project (“The Other Question,” “Sly Civility”) and can be grafted onto consideration of the botanical metaphors used by Deleuze and Guattari that circulate in the postcolonial context (Ashcroft, Buchanan, Gunew, Olinsky). Under the project of deconstructing binaries and refusing Freudian hierarchies, these creative philosopher-theorists set up a contrast between territory and deterritorialisation, hierarchical fixity and lateral subversive nomadology, figured as the difference between root plants and rhizomes.

The relevance of this for literary studies can be seen in Mark Williams’s discussion of the centrifistic, traditionalist metaphors for canonical curriculum formation. One of his colleagues opined that the Renaissance was the torso of English Studies and “all historically and geographically distant periods are the outer limbs” (Williams 22). This presumably leaves Williams’s own field of contemporary New Zealand literature as the small toe! The other metaphors commonly applied to such literary and cultural relations are “mainstream and tributary” (or backwater!) and “trunk and branch.” All are prejudicial to the emergence of the new and the distant or different, assimilating everything to existing authorised taxonomy and institutional structure. Anything worth serious study will eventually come to look like yet another oak in the Shakespearean forests of Arden.

Now changing metaphors can be merely an academic game of aesthetic satisfaction, but to change a system we have to find new ways of thinking about it, and metaphors are especially appropriate in the context of textual and language studies. As Lakoff and Johnson point out, we live by them: they provide conceptual frames that indirectly and subtly structure our behaviour. So what alternative have we to the oak and any trunk-branch binary? In A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari suggest the rhizome, a plant like the potato, bamboo, mint, the iris, couch grass, that spreads in all directions laterally and underground as a network of stems (not roots) which generate new buds. They claim the following qualities for their model:

Multiplicities are rhizomatic, and expose arborescent pseudo multiplicities for what they are ... A multiplicity has no subject or object ... (8) A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines ... Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. (9) We’re tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. (15) The rhizome is an antigenealogy. It is a short-term memory, or ant memoria. (21)
Now our chattily rhetorical theorists are well aware that their binary terms can be grafted across and swapped about, but they are contrasting binaries nonetheless (entailing rhetorical exaggeration at times of an egregiously Orientalist nature! 18–19), and have certainly been received as such by those endeavouring to distinguish between colonial and decolonising texts and critical practices. I am sure that some disgruntled recipient of the colonial seed/gospel labouring on a mission or a rubber/tea/copra/cotton/sisal/oil palm plantation might, in Calibanic mode, have cursed the day s/he heard of the Tree of Knowledge or the Tree of Life, but in the ambiguous world of the mission and plantation, where settlement and motion, rootedness and expansiveness go together, neat distinctions, even of a metaphorical nature, are hard to apply. The plantation (church or business) operated to fix and totalise surveillance over its “labourers in the vineyard,” but it trained them to be restless and moved them around so that they could frequently evade colonial
controls or play one set off against another. Such instability eventually enabled
the new settlement of the independent nation, a fixity (rootedness) that
mobilised its own "plantations" of teachers, police, clerks, medical workers,
magistrates across a varied geographical and social landscape, and which itself
was part of an international movement of labour and capital.

In the context of our botanical metaphors, it seems to me that the postcolonial, like the colonial before it — also the nation and the global network — need a configuration more complex than the tree/rhizome dichotomy. Rhizomes, after all, still need soil, water and air, just as roots do; and they are not inherently liberationist. The statement "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other and must be" (Deleuze and Guattari 7) might equally describe the plantation system in the Pacific (a loose assortment of small settlements trading with larger commercial firms in the service ultimately of manufacturers such as Lever and Kitchen), or the mission stucture (especially the semi-autonomous units of Protestant missions like the LMS) or empire itself. Macdonald's, in the contemporary globalising context, may have a hierarchical financial "trunk," but functionally as a proliferating set of franchises (a "machinic assemblage"), it is a kind of multi-national rhizomic couch-grass. And while we may applaud the "nomadic" subversions of short-term tactical flexibility (cargo cults and subaltern rebellions), we recall the folk-"spiritual" inspiring the strategy of the Civil Rights/anti-Vietnam War era: "Like a tree that's standing by the waterside, We shall not be moved." In his clearly oppositional fable of resistance, Matigari, Ngugi peppers his oral-style Gikuyu narrative with biblical symbols to reach a missionised African audience, but grounds the entire text not on a rhizome, but on the migumo tree of local creation mythology. Anti-imperialist nationalism and the "micropolitics" of minorities draw power from long-term memory, from "genealogical" insistence on difference — from "roots."

A further difficulty with the rhizome metaphor is that rhizomic plants
genetically copy themselves ad infinitum across their stems of reproduction;
trees allow modifications across the species. A post-colonial theory stressing
specificity and difference somehow needs to incorporate variation of the
"arborescent" kind. Global neo-colonial plantation agri-business is structurally
rhizomic — destroy one cotton crop in Australia and another one in Kenya
will pick up the shortfall in the market; it is the sameness of supermarket
choice. A variety of different corner stores, or the small-scale differences of
pluralised local bio-diversity, flexibly varied but specifically "grounded" seems
a more appropriate postcolonial model (one in line with Bhabha's distinction
between "diversity" and "difference" and his search for a "third space beyond
"the politics of polarity" [32-34,39]) in which the rhizomic mixes tactically
with rootedness, surplus with subsistence, in a complex strategic play of forces.

V
To return to a Pacific Island context, there is a story in which a Samoan clan
leader appropriates the power of traditional authority and the indigenised
mission church to increase his status and his aiga's wealth under a new mode
of western materialist capitalism. He orders the clearing of a massive tract of
hillside forest, pressuring his debtors, lackeys and family into creating a plantation
for cash profit. On the proceeds, he controls the village store, trucks produce
to the city market, sets up house in town and becomes, under the facade of
tradition and high morality, a venal, double-dealing, modern bourgeois
businessman, currying favour with white colonials. In the middle of his new
plantation, however, resisting all attempts to cut and burn it down, stands a
huge banyan tree. Partly a manifestation of the strength and resolve of the
protagonist, and partly a sign of integrity exposing his inauthentic and
hypocritical striving after the trappings of power, the banyan represents pre-
Christian belief (as in India, it's held to be the abode of spirits) and the resilience
of indigenous culture. The leader, Tauliopepe, fears and seeks to cast aside all
that it stands for, even as in some respects he himself embodies the carrying
through of old practices into a new era. But he still gives its name to his
plantation and it gives its name to the book. This is, of course, Albert Wendt's
epic novel, Leaves of the Banyan Tree.

Now, much as I would like to for the sake of anti-essentialist hybridity
theory and my mission and trade line of argument, I can't make a claim that
this sign of local authenticity is actually introduced by missionaries — it has
a different botanical label: not ficus bengalensis but ficus graeffii (Parham).
But it is, once more, a symbolic connecting of plant, plantation, knowledge,
trade, and religious belief. And it is a potentially instructive figure for post-
colonial use.¹ Ambiguous, distinctive, anomalous, representative. A parasite
creeper that weaves itself into its own arboreal authority. A rooted tree of vertical majesty that yet moves sideways, sending down new roots which may send up new plants. Our opening Indian and closing Pacific banyans are the same species (moraceae) with similar form and even cultural attributes, but distinct identities in each place.

To return to the Calcutta Botanical Gardens, Vikram Seth has his character Amit take his potential suitable girl there. He tell her about the novel he is starting to write:

“At the moment it feels like a banyan tree.”

“I see,” said Lata, though she didn’t.

“What I mean is,” continued Amit, “it sprouts and grows, and spreads, and drops down branches that become trunks or intertwine with other branches. Sometimes branches die. Sometimes the trunk dies and the structure is held up by the supporting trunks. When you go to the Botanic Gardens you’ll see what I mean. It has its own life.” (524)

Perhaps, between Seth and Wendt, we have here a Pacific/Indic means of negotiation between Deleuze and Guattari’s abstractedly subversive, non-genealogical rhizome and the distinctly genealogical, long-memoried rootedness that indigenous and minority groups insist upon as a basis for resisting the plantation/s of imperialist power. I like to think that in the encounter between Indian and English evangelists under a tree in Delhi in 1877 celebrated by Homi Bhabha as a case of sly civility (Bhabha 102), the transplanted and transformed sowing of the white man’s w/Word occurred beneath a banyan tree.

University of Wollongong

Note

1 Coincidentally, after a draft of this paper was completed, I came across a similar suggestion in Julia Ravell’s recent doctoral thesis on Wendt (4).

Works Cited


Encarta 95, CD ROM Encyclopedia. Microsoft Corp.


LMS. London Missionary Society material is held in the archives of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Correspondence is filed as CMS: South Seas.


Parham, B.E.V. *The Plants of Samoa* Wellington: NZ Department of Science and Industrial Relations, 1972: 16.


