

The Coco-de-Mer abroad – notes supplementary to Fauvel’s 1915 monograph

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Before the discovery of living Coco-de-Mer *Lodoicea maldivica* palms on Praslin in by Barré in 1768, the nuts were washed up on Asian shores, primarily the Maldives, and acquired a medicinal reputation and fabulous prices due to their rarity, erotic shape and mysterious origin (Fauvel 1915, Lionnet 1970, McAteer 2001). Later, once the price bubble had been burst by the Indian market being flooded with fresh nuts by French-Mauritian sea-captain Jean Duchemin in 1769, there was nonetheless an ongoing demand for the hard shells to make containers (Fauvel 1915, Lionnet 1970) – even today they can sometimes be seen in use in temples in southern India (pers. obs. 1981). Medicinal and culinary use, apparently of smuggled nuts, continues in China (Mak & Mok 2011), and unworked whole Coco-de-Mer nuts (*Lodoicea maldivica*) now sell for up to £562 in London auctions (e.g. in January 2014, <http://www.bonhams.com/auctions/21325/lot/239>). Recent studies have concentrated on the palm’s biology and conservation (e.g. Gerlach 2003, Rist *et al.* 2010).

Fauvel’s rarely-read 138-page study contains a very complete bibliography of the Coco-de-Mer up to 1906 when his work was completed; Lionnet’s booklet is in essence a very condensed version of Fauvel’s work, with some updating.

Medicinal uses in the 17th century

Early European writers were generally more struck by the nuts’ rarity and monetary value than the medicinal uses of the kernel, it being generally rather vaguely referred to in the 16th and 17th centuries as good against poisons and venereal disease (Fauvel 1915). However John Marshall’s detailed description from his travels 1668-1672 was not published until 1927 (Khan 1927), so unknown to Fauvel. Given its date, the detail of how the medication was prepared, and the rarity of Khan’s book, Marshall’s text is reproduced here, in his original orthography:

Coco Maldivica

Coco Maldivica or Sea Cocho is found upon the Maldiva islands and is there cast up by the Sea. It is supposed to grow upon a tree in the sea, so that when it is ripe, the strength of the water breaks it from the branch on which it growes. It is much like other Coconutt, only bigger. Tis a Sovereign Antidote against poison, being ground upon a Stone and a little water put to it and drunk. Tis also very good against fevers, being drunk with water, and for Agues drunk with Arrack. The usual way is to take the Nut and rub it upon a stone, and putting a littel water upon it, untill you have rubbed of[f] such a quantity as will make white and as thick as milk a quarter of a

pint of water. Then put into said quantity of water and drink it of[f], going to bed or keeping warme after it. But if for an Ague, instead of water, take Arrack, Brandy or Sack. The greater the distemper is, the greater quantity must be taken. This nut is very deare. I have paid for [a] peece of its Kernell 4 times its weight in Rupee silver for it.

[from Harleian MS 4254, folio 15 (British Library); Khan (1927), p.331]

Muslim water and alms bowls

Crooke (in Yule & Burnell 1903) noted that “the hard shell is largely used to make Fakirs’ water bowls” and Fauvel (1915) expanded on the use of partial nuts as drinking vessels by mendicant fakirs in India and Persia (Iran), some intricately carved. Lionnet (1971) added that nuts exported ‘until recently’ “made fakir’s bowls and were also used by pilgrims to Mecca to eat their food, since these pilgrims are supposed to use only utensils produced by nature”. ‘India’, pre-1947, included the what are now the largely Muslim countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Travelling recently in Turkey, I was surprised to find a half-nut displayed in the museum in Konya dedicated to the Sufi poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi and his order of whirling dervishes (Figs 1 & 2). The misidentified nut, dated as 19th century, bears the following label: “Keshkül, which means bowl of the poor, is made from a large coconut, cut from its upper side, carved and chained from both ends. There are some bowls made from metals such as silver or copper keeping its unique form”. There is no indication of how these nuts reached Turkey (and the museum clearly confused them with coconuts *Cocos nucifera*), but they were possibly acquired in Mecca from Indian pilgrims.



Fig.1. Dervish alms bowl made from half a coco-de-mer nut in the Rumi museum, Konya, Turkey; to the right is part of a silver bowl made in a similar style [author’s photo].



Fig.2. The same nut seen from above – from a photo on the museum’s information panel.

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