

# COFFEE & CAFFEINE CULTURES

May 1, 2025

12 to 6 p.m. | LuEsther T. Mertz Library Reading Room



## Speakers:

- Bula Wayessa (University of Minnesota Twin Cities)
- Michelle Al-Ferzly (Yale University—Beinecke Library)
- Prita Meier (NYU IFA)
- Neha Vermani (University of Durham, UK & University of Sheffield, UK)
- Luthfi Adam (Monash University, Indonesia)
- Romita Ray (Syracuse University)
- Mark Plotkin (Amazon Conservation Team)

# Conference Schedule

- 12pm**      **Science x Plant Humanities: Introductory Remarks**  
—Lucas Mertehikian (Director of the Humanities Institute, NYBG)  
—Mauricio Diazgranados (Chief Science Officer & Dean of Science, NYBG)
- 12:10pm**    **Conference Origins & Stimulant Sea Project Introductory Remarks**  
—Amy Y.T. Chang (Bibliotheca Hertziana; Harvard University)  
—Justin Anthony Mann (Dumbarton Oaks; Eastern Michigan University)
- 12:30pm**    **Pannel I. Coffee Origins: Africa, the Red Sea & the Indian Ocean**
- (1) *Where Coffee is Eaten: Oromo Traditions of Taste and Togetherness*  
Bula Wayessa (University of Minnesota Twin Cities)
  - (2) *Distinction and Desire: Coffee and Caffeine Culture in Late Mamluk Egypt*  
Michelle Al-Ferzly (Yale University—Beinecke Library)
  - (3) *Trading Worlds: Swahili Art and the Flows of the Indian Ocean*  
Prita Meier (New York University—Institute of Fine Arts)
- 1:30pm**      **Panel I Q&A**  
**2pm**            **Coffee Break**
- 2:30pm**      **Pannel II. Histories of Consumption & Cultivation in South & Southeast Asia**
- (4) *"Beloved of a dark hue": Coffee consumption in early modern South Asia*  
Neha Vermani (University of Durham, UK & University of Sheffield, UK)
  - (5) *Coffee, Colonial Governmentality, & Agrarian Resistance in Colonial Indonesia*  
Luthfi Adam (Monash University, Indonesia)
  - (6) *Whither Assamica? Coffee, Tea, and Sri Lanka*  
Romita Ray (Syracuse University)
- 3:30pm**      **Panel II Q & A**  
**4pm**            **Coffee Break**

**4:30pm**      **NYBG Concluding Lecture**  
**The Prehistory of Coffee and the Origin of Human Consciousness: The Mocha Java Man Hypothesis**

Mark Plotkin (Amazon Conservation Team)

**5:30pm**      **Concluding Lecture Q & A**

## **Abstracts**

**12:30pm**      **Pannel I. Coffee Origins: Africa, the Red Sea & the Indian Ocean**

**(1) *Where Coffee is Eaten: Oromo Traditions of Taste and Togetherness***

**Bula Wayessa** (University of Minnesota Twin Cities)

This paper examines the distinctive cultural practice of coffee consumption among the Oromo people of Ethiopia, emphasizing how this seemingly unconventional culinary tradition reflects core values of identity, community, and hospitality. Unlike the global norm of drinking brewed coffee, the Oromo traditionally roast whole coffee berries, mix them with spiced butter, and serve them in a way that is both nutritionally rich and culturally resonant. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and oral histories, the study situates this practice within the broader context of Oromo foodways and socio-cultural life. It explores both the sensory dimensions and symbolic meanings of coffee consumption, revealing its function as a source of nourishment, a medium of social connection, and a channel for intergenerational knowledge and cultural continuity. By reframing coffee not merely as a beverage or commodity but as a multifaceted expression of Oromo heritage, this paper positions the act of “eating coffee” as an expressive assertion of identity.

**Bula Wayessa** is an assistant professor in the Department of African American & African Studies at the University of Minnesota. He earned his Ph.D. in Archaeology from the University of Calgary in Canada. His research interests encompass agrarian change, social identity, mobility, and ontology.

<https://cla.umn.edu/about/directory/profile/bwayessa#publications>

## **(2) *Distinction and Desire: Coffee and Caffeine Culture in Late Mamluk Egypt***

**Michelle Al-Ferzly** (Yale University—Beinecke Library)

Sources recounting the arrival of coffee in late medieval Cairo often situate Egypt as a conduit for the dissemination of caffeine culture across the broader Middle East and the Ottoman Empire. These early decades of reception, which occurred during the final years of the Mamluk Sultanate's control over Egypt, reveal coffee's troubled beginnings in the Islamic Mediterranean, where the substance was both highly coveted but also, at times, an outlawed substance as outlined by religious scholars and the political elite.

This paper examines the place of coffee within the broader context of food and feasting cultures in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century in Egypt, where a growing administrative class enabled greater access to objects and foodstuffs previously uniquely within the domain of courtly circles. By situating the beginnings of a caffeine culture within the broader history of dining practices in the late medieval Islamic Middle East, this presentation sheds light on coffee's central place in material culture, and the performance of masculine sociality and elite identity in the region.

**Michelle Al-Ferzly** is a Curator of Early Books and Manuscripts at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. She is trained as a medieval Islamic art historian, and completed her PhD from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 2023. Her current project investigates the visual and material cultures of food in the Islamic Mediterranean and Central Asia, and she previously served as a Research Associate at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she contributed to the 2023 exhibition, *Africa & Byzantium*.

<https://yale.academia.edu/MichelleAlFerzly>

## **(3) *Trading Worlds: Swahili Art and the Flows of the Indian Ocean***

**Prita Meier** (New York University—Institute of Fine Arts)

The Swahili Coast—where Africa meets the Indian Ocean—has for over a millennium been a dynamic crossroads of global exchange. For centuries, traders, sailors, and settlers from the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, Europe, and across Africa have traveled to and from this East African littoral, drawn by its bustling port towns and the commercial possibilities shaped by the monsoon winds. These currents carried not only people but also commodities—ivory, gold, textiles, ceramics, and spices—transforming the region into a key node in transoceanic trade networks.

This constant movement of goods, along with the migrations of people, ideas, and belief systems, generated a rich and layered material culture. Swahili art objects, architecture, and ornamentation reflect the flows of commerce and empire, the formation of diasporic communities, and the shifting contours of social identity. This talk examines Swahili arts through the intertwined lenses of trade, encounter, and imperialism, while grappling with the

interpretive challenges posed by artworks that resist containment within modern territorial and disciplinary boundaries.

**Prita Meier** is Associate Professor of Art History at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts and in the Department of Art History. A specialist in African and Indian Ocean visual cultures, she is the author of *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere* (2016) and *The Surface of Things: A History of Photography from the Swahili Coast* (2024). She also co-edited *World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts across the Indian Ocean* (2017). Meier's research explores the intersections of mobility, empire, and material culture across transoceanic networks.

<https://ifa.nyu.edu/people/faculty/meier.htm>

**2: 30pm      Pannel II. Histories of Consumption & Cultivation in South & Southeast Asia**

**(4) “Beloved of a dark hue”: Coffee consumption in early modern South Asia**  
**Neha Vermani** (University of Durham, UK & University of Sheffield, UK)

Before India and Pakistan became predominantly tea-drinking nations, it was coffee and coffee shops that animated the lives of early modern people in these regions. But much of this history remains forgotten, especially in public memory and discourse, where coffee and cafés are now ironically associated with modernity and a European way of life. In this talk, I will lavish attention on the social and cultural world of coffee in 16th to 18th-century India and Pakistan (which were a single entity during this period). Historians have highlighted how coffee, an imported commodity, travelled from the red sea region to early modern South Asian port cities via the Indian Ocean maritime trade networks. Using these studies as a starting point, I will examine the underexplored aspects of coffee's reception, preparation, and consumption, as well as the institution of coffee shops during the early modern period. To do so, I will draw on a variety of sources, ranging from court chronicles, poetry, and travel accounts to recipe manuals and material remains.

**Neha Vermani** specialises in the cultural and intellectual history of early modern South Asia, focusing on the study of material culture, food and beverage practices, human-plant-animal encounters, and the histories of science and the senses. She is working on her first book, *Tasting the Empire: Food, Body, and Connoisseurship in Mughal South Asia*, which draws on her doctoral thesis completed at Royal Holloway University of

London as well as her postdoctoral research on the Mellon Foundation-funded project *Before 'Farm to Table': Early Modern Foodways and Cultures* at the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC, and as a British Academy Newton International Fellow at the Department of History, University of Sheffield. She is currently co-editing a volume *Decoding Recipes: Knowledge and Practice across Space and Time*, to be published by Brill.

#### **(5) *Coffee, Colonial Governmentality, & Agrarian Resistance in Colonial Indonesia***

**Luthfi Adam** (Monash University, Indonesia)

This presentation examines the role of coffee as both a cultivated crop and an agent of historical transformation in colonial Indonesia. Moving beyond state-centred narratives, it explores how local agrarian communities in Java, Sumatra, and other islands integrated coffee into their landscapes, livelihoods, and sociopolitical worlds. Introduced by the Dutch East India Company, coffee cultivation spread rapidly through local adaptation, often beyond the full control of colonial authorities. As coffee became a key export commodity, the Dutch sought to regulate its production through co-optation of Indigenous Authority, spatial reorganization, productivity metrics, scientific and technocratic intervention, and civilizing justification—techniques emblematic of colonial governmentality. These interventions, however, frequently clashed with indigenous practices, generating frictions, resistance, and alternative circuits of cultivation and exchange. By centering coffee as a historical actor, this presentation highlights the entangled relationships between plants, people, and power, and reveals the limits of colonial authority in shaping agrarian life.

**Luthfi Adam** is a historian of Southeast Asia and environmental history, with a PhD from Northwestern University. He is currently a Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Research at Monash University Indonesia, where he also teaches in the Master of Public Policy and Management program. Luthfi was previously a Fellow in Garden and Landscape Studies at Dumbarton Oaks, Harvard University, and an Arryman Fellow at the EDGS-Buffett Institute for Global Affairs at Northwestern University. His first book project, *Cultivating Power: Botany and Empire in the Dutch East Indies*, is under contract with Cornell University Press.

<https://www.monash.edu/indonesia/about/academic-staff/luthfi-adam>



## **(6) Whither Assamica? Coffee, Tea, and Sri Lanka**

**Romita Ray** (Syracuse University)

In 1839, Nathaniel Wallich, director of the Calcutta Botanic Gardens and a member of the Tea Committee established by the Governor General Lord William Bentinck in India, sent seeds from Assam tea plants to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Peradeniya, near Kandy, in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Arriving a few years after Wallich had led a tea expedition to Assam, the seeds would constitute a small but significant node of tea on an island dominated by coffee plants. As such, they gesture at the entangled histories of tea and coffee that would follow, before tea took over coffee to become the primary plant product of Sri Lanka. As coffee planters began growing small batches of tea, James Taylor, a young manager on Loolecondera estate embarked on a more ambitious tea planting scheme in 1867, cultivating tea from Assam seed across nineteen acres of land. Founded as a coffee plantation, Loolecondera now emerged as Sri Lanka's first tea estate. By the 1870s, a coffee blight would wipe out nearly 400,000 acres of coffee trees across the island, prompting a widescale switch to tea monocultures. Keeping these botanical and commercial histories in mind, my paper tracks Assamica from Assam to Peradeniya, and from botanical gardens to coffee plantations across India and Sri Lanka. What, then, might Sri Lanka's tea leaf tell us about reinventing Assam tea as Ceylon tea? It is this fundamental question to which I turn in my paper, as I examine botanical specimens and images, plantation photographs, and tea advertisements.

**Romita Ray** is associate professor of art history at Syracuse University where she serves as Director of Undergraduate Studies in Art History. She is the author of *Under the Banyan Tree: Relocating the Picturesque in British India* (2013) and *The Eternal Masquerade: Prints and Paintings by Gerald Leslie Brockhurst (1890-1978) from the Jacob Burns Foundation* (2006). Ray has also published widely on the art and architecture of the British empire in India and has curated exhibitions at the Georgia Museum of Art (University of Georgia), the Syracuse University Art Museum, and the National Portrait Gallery (London). Ray is currently working on a book manuscript on the visual cultures of tea in India tentatively titled, *Leafy Wonders: Art, Science, and the Aesthetics of Tea in India*. She is a member of the Advisory Committee for the Plant Humanities Initiative at Dumbarton Oaks.

<https://artsandsciences.syracuse.edu/people/faculty/ray--kapoor-romita/>

#### **4:30pm      NYBG Concluding Lecture**

### **The Prehistory of Coffee and the Origin of Human Consciousness: The Mocha Java Man Hypothesis**

**Mark Plotkin** (Amazon Conservation Team)

Coffee is the most widely consumed mind-altering plant in the world, with a rich and intriguing history. The well-documented story of coffee features adultery, larceny, imperialism, spies, smugglers, and slave revolts. I believe the prehistory of coffee may be just as interesting, and even more important. Several hundred thousand years ago, the brain size of our primate ancestors underwent a relatively rapid increase in volume, resulting in what we now consider the human brain. Evolutionary biologists continue to debate the precise cause of this change: the development of language? The mastery of fire? Some have proposed that it was the consumption of fermented fruits—the so-called “Drunk Monkey Hypothesis.” Others have suggested it was the ingestion of magic mushrooms—the so-called “Stoned Ape Hypothesis.” This lecture will argue that a more likely ethnobotanical explanation is the consumption of *Coffea arabica*.

**Mark Plotkin** is a renowned ethnobotanist who has studied traditional indigenous plant use with elder shamans (traditional healers) of Central and South America for much of the past 30 years. As an ethnobotanist—a scientist who studies how, and why, societies have come to use plants for different purposes—Dr. Plotkin carried out the majority of his research with the Trio Indians of southern Suriname, a small rainforest country in northeastern South America, but has also worked with shamans from Mexico to Brazil. Dr. Plotkin has a long history of work with other organizations to promote conservation and awareness of our natural world, having served as Research Associate in Ethnobotanical Conservation at the Botanical Museum of Harvard University; Director of Plant Conservation at the World Wildlife Fund; Vice President of Conservation International; and Research Associate at the Department of Botany of the Smithsonian Institution. Dr. Plotkin is now President of the Amazon Conservation Team (ACT), a nonprofit organization he co-founded with his fellow conservationist and wife Liliana Madrigal in 1996.

<https://markplotkin.com/>