SPRINGS

THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

Issue #7 | 2025

May

© Alison Pouliot and Valérie Chételat

THE NUTMEG'S CURSE

Amitav Ghosh

Springs
The Rachel Carson Center Review

7 • 2025

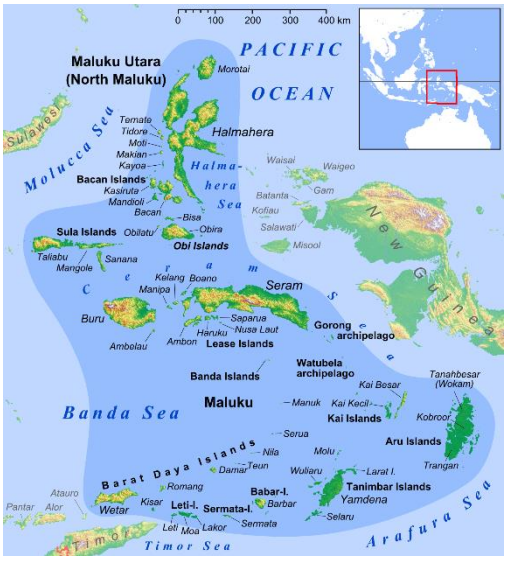
Amitav Ghosh

Red mace surrounds the nutmeg seed. © 2016 Bob Sacha on Getty Images. All rights reserved.

The story of *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021) begins almost exactly 400 years ago, in a very faraway place—so far away that very few of you are likely to have heard of it. That place is the Banda Archipelago, a tiny cluster of islands in the far southeastern quadrant of the Indian Ocean. The largest of these islands is only two-and-a-half miles in length and half a mile in width—so minuscule are the Banda Islands that on most maps they are marked only as a sprinkling of dots.

The Banda Islands are the offspring of the Ring of Fire, which runs all the way around the rim of the Pacific Ocean. A still-active volcano, Gunung Api ("fire mountain"), towers above the Bandas, its peak perpetually wreathed in plumes of swirling cloud and upwelling steam.

Gunung Api is one of a great number of volcanoes in this stretch of ocean; the surrounding waters are dotted with beautifully formed, conical mountains that surge majestically out of the waves, some of them rising to heights of over a thousand meters or more. The very name of the region, Maluku (which gave birth to the English toponym Moluccas) is said to derive from *Molòko*, a word that means "mountain" or "mountain island."[1]



Location of the Banda Islands in the center of the Maluku Islands. Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 3.0.

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-14636

The mountain-islands of Maluku often erupt with devastating force, yet there is also something magical about these convulsions, something akin to the pain of childbirth. For the eruptions of Maluku's volcanoes bring to the surface alchemical mixtures of materials, which interact with the winds and weather of the region in such a way as to create forests that teem with wonders and rarities.

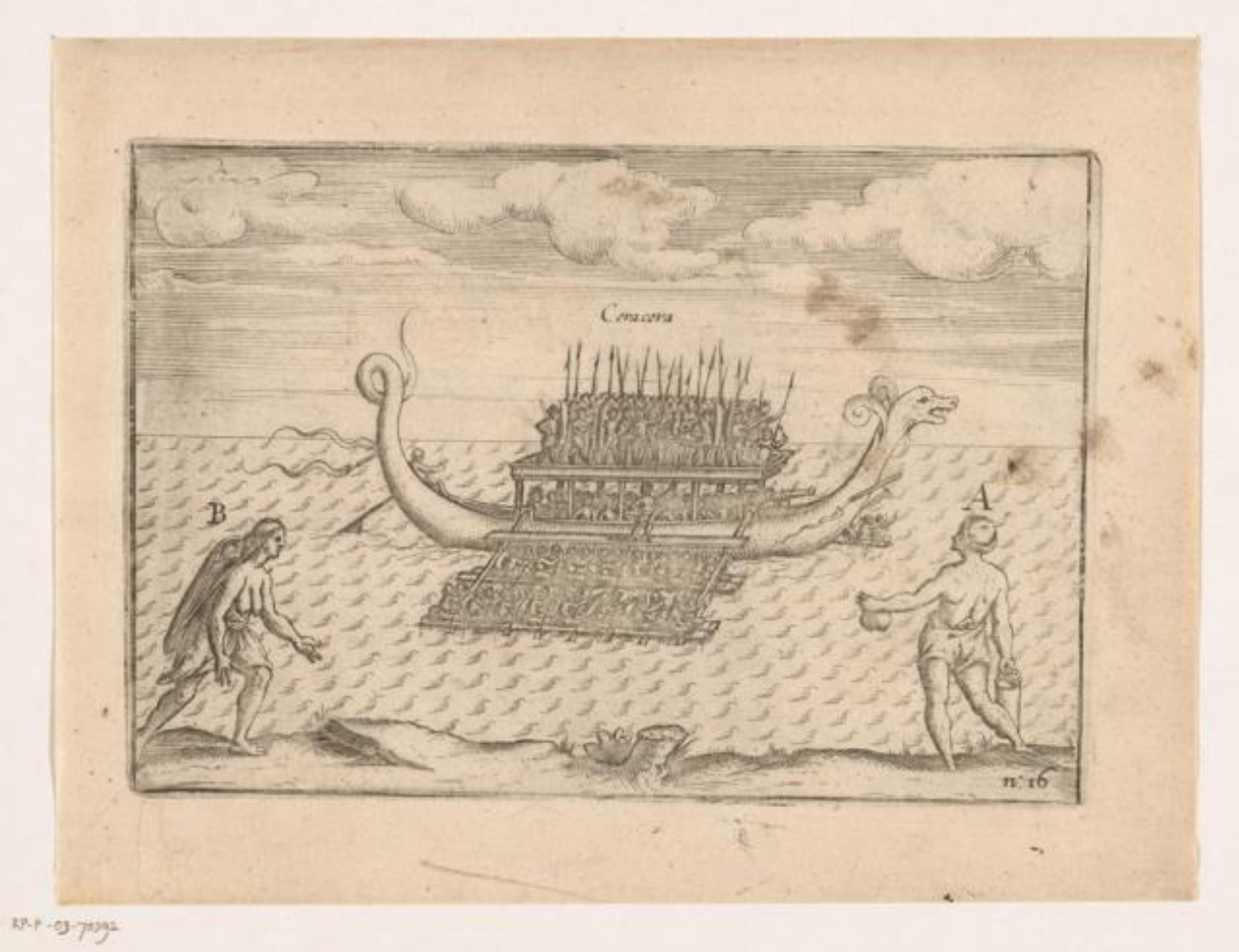
View of Gunung Api. 1870–1900, unknown photographer. Courtesy of Tropenmuseum archives. Public domain.

In the case of the Banda Islands, the gift of Gunung Api was a botanical species that has flourished on this tiny archipelago like nowhere else: the tree that produces both nutmeg and mace. Before the eighteenth century, every nutmeg and every shred of mace came from the Banda Islands. From textual sources and archaeological materials it can be established that nutmegs and mace have been in circulation around Asia, Africa, and Europe since antiquity—so despite their remoteness, the Banda Islands have been connected to the world through trade for thousands of years.

Over the centuries these spices became extremely valuable; in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a handful of nutmegs could buy a house or a ship in Amsterdam or Lisbon. On what was their value founded? The idea that they were used to preserve food is a myth: The commonest of household ingredients, salt, is actually a far better preservative. Why then did these culinary condiments come to be so greatly valued? The answer is simple: Because spices connoted luxury; because only the affluent could afford them.

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-14636

In the late Middle Ages nutmegs reached Europe by changing hands many times, at many points of transit. The latter stages of their journey took them through Egypt, or the Levant, to Venice, which ran a tightly controlled monopoly on the European spice trade in the centuries before the voyages of Christopher Columbus and Vasco de Gama.[2] Columbus himself was from Genoa, where Venice's monopoly on the eastern trade had long been bitterly resented; it was in order to break the Serene Republic's hold on that trade the navigators set off on the journeys that led to the Americas and the Indian Ocean. Among their goals, one of the most important was to find the islands that were home to the nutmeg. The stakes were immense, for the navigators and for the monarchs who financed them: the spice race, it has been said, was the space race of its time.



Anonymous artist, *Coracora van de Banda-eilanden, 1599* [Coracora from the Banda Islands, 1599], 1600–1601, print, 14.5 x 21.5 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, object no. RP-P-OB-75.392, https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/200488769. A coracora (traditional canoe from the Maluku Islands) from the Banda Islands, 1599. Moluccan warship with rowers and inhabitants of Banda in the foreground. Public domain.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to reach the Banda Islands, in 1511, but others followed hot on their heels, first the Spanish then the Dutch and the English. What the Europeans had in common was that they all wanted to impose a monopoly on the trade in nutmegs and mace. The Dutch were the most relentless of all, sending fleets to the islands again and again, with the intention of forcing treaties on their inhabitants. The islanders were few in number—there were only about fifteen thousand of them altogether—but they resisted so stubbornly that in 1621 the governor general of the Dutch East Indies, Jan Pieterszoon Coen—who is remembered today for coining the aphorism, "No war without trade, no trade without war"—decided that the Banda problem needed a final

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-14636

solution: The islands needed to be emptied of their inhabitants. Once the Bandanese were gone, settlers and slaves would be brought in to create a new plantation economy in the archipelago. So in February 1621 Coen led a Dutch fleet to the Banda Islands and issued orders to the inhabitants to abandon their villages and leave their homes. Naturally they did not comply, so in April 1621 Coen implemented his final solution: On his orders, in a period of a few weeks, the Dutch effectively eliminated the entire population of the islands—several thousand were killed, several thousand died of starvation or disease, and the rest were enslaved and deported.

Unknown artist, *Massacre of Banda*, Rumah Budaya museum, Banda Neira. Japanese mercenaries hired by Dutch traders in the seventeenth century killed the most influential Bandanese leaders. Public domain.

In short, within a few months the Bandanese, once a proud and enterprising trading community, had ceased to exist as a people. Their world had been brought to an end in a span of less than ten weeks. The Bandanese were thus among the earliest victims of a scourge that now threatens to engulf the entire planet—the "resource curse."

How should the story of the nutmeg be told and does it even matter? After all, what happened on the Banda Islands was merely one instance of a history of colonization that was then unfolding on a vastly larger scale on the other side of the earth, in the Americas. It might be said that the page has been turned on that chapter of history; that the twenty-first century bears no resemblance to that long-ago time when plants and botanical matter could decide the fate of human beings; that humanity has freed itself from the earth and the soil and is now in an era when human-made goods take precedence over the products of the earth. What possible bearing could this centuries-old story have on our times?

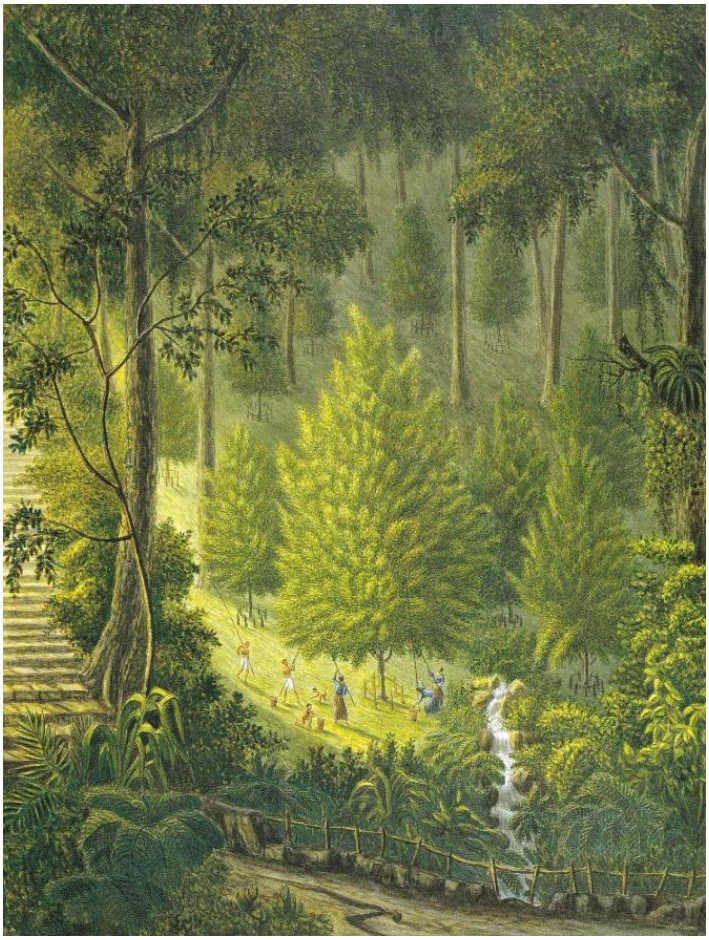
DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-14636

The trouble is that none of the above is true.

Humanity is today even *more* dependent on botanical matter than it was three hundred, or five hundred, or even five millennia ago, and not just for food. Most people in the world today are completely dependent, in every aspect of their lives, on energy that comes from long-buried carbon—and what are coal, oil, and natural gas except fossilized forms of botanical matter?

The sales of this fossilized botanical matter amount to over ten trillion dollars annually, and the trading and transporting of fossil fuels generates another three trillion dollars. No human-made commodity comes even close to commanding so large a share of global trade and shipping. If anything, it was in the premodern era that manufactured goods, like textiles and porcelain, accounted for a greater share of global trade.

The truth is that human beings have never been more dependent on the earth's provisions—botanical matter, most of all—than they are today. The idea that modern Man has freed himself from the planet is not just absurd; it is a dangerous delusion.



Quirijn Maurits Rudolph Ver Huell, *Calha Boca. op het Eiland Lonthoir. en Noten-muscaat Oogst. Banda.* [Nutmeg harvest on Lontor, Banda Islands], c. 1830, watercolor 54.3 x 38.1 cm, Maritiem Museum, object no. P2161-31, https://mmr.adlibhosting.com/ais6V50/Details/collect/98927. Public domain.

Once the reality of humanity's ever-increasing servitude to the earth is acknowledged, the story of the Bandanese no longer seems so distant from our present predicament. To the contrary, the continuities between the two are so pressing and powerful that it could even be said that the fate of the Banda Islands might be read as a template for the present, if only we knew how to tell that story.

Notes

[1] Frans S. Watuseke, "The Name Moluccas, Maluku," *Asian Profile* 5, no. 3 (June 1977).

[2] Michael Krondl, *The Taste of Conquest: The Rise and Fall of the Three Great Cities of Spice* (Ballantine Books, 2008), 907.

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-14636

Indian writer and anthropologist **Amitav Ghosh**—winner of the 2024 Erasmus Prize—has addressed the human cost of today's planetary crisis in his fictional and nonfictional work. He is the bestselling author of 10 novels, including the Ibis Trilogy (2008–2015), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and *Gun Island* (2019), and of several works of nonfiction, from *The Great Derangement* (2016) to *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021). Amitav holds a PhD in social anthropology from the University of Oxford and has been a full-time writer since 2004. In 2024, he was a short-term visiting scholar at the RCC, giving talks including the one published here.

Cite this article

Ghosh, Amitav. "The Nutmeg's Curse." *Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review*, no. 7 (May 2025). https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc-springs-14636.

Springs: *The Rachel Carson Center Review* is an open-access online publication for peer-reviewed articles, creative nonfiction, and artistic contributions that showcase the work of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) and its community across the world. In the spirit of Rachel Carson, it publishes sharp writing with an impact. Surveying the interrelationship between environmental and social changes from a wealth of disciplines and perspectives, it is a place to share rigorous research, test out fresh ideas, question old ones, and to advance public and scholarly debates in the environmental humanities and beyond.

Springs is available online. To view, please visit
https://springs-rcc.org

ISSN 2751-9317

SPONSORED BY THE

Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research