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**THE FATE OF THE BRANDED FOREST:
SCIENCE, VIOLENCE AND SEDUCTION IN THE WORLD
OF TEAK**

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A defining trait of modern capitalism is the role of the brand in shaping consumer choice. As brand-named goods deepen their colonisation of the mind, they exert great influence on a wide array of consumer products and associated production processes (Klein 2000). However this story is neither new nor confined to the world of manufactured goods. The branding of nature is a case in point. This process has long ruled the fate of forests home to sought after trees (such as mahogany and teak) – species whose biophysical ‘properties’ underpin brand identity. Yet very little is known about the ways in which brands and branding relate to the social life of forests. This chapter provides initial insight into this phenomenon. It does so with reference to teak, a valuable hardwood found notably in Burma.

The branding of teak reflects a wider human attempt to manipulate nature. Yet the brand stands out inasmuch as it is closely associated with economic activity under capitalism. The word comes from the Old Norse *brandr* (‘to burn’) from whence it was incorporated into English as “an identifying mark burned on livestock etc with a hot iron” (Thompson 1996, 113). This phenomenon was linked to the development of trade insofar as it facilitated exchange: (1) it was a means to *mark ownership* of a product thereby providing the seller some guarantee of possession; (2) it permitted *informed discrimination* as buyers could readily link product to producer; and (3) it helped *identify ‘quality’* which might be due to skilled labour or superior conditions of production. As such, the brand joined such things as the circulation of money and the legal enforcement of contracts as an essential ingredient in market elaboration. The industrial revolution brought further change. Use of brands became widespread as rapid developments in manufacturing, communications, advertising, business organisation, trade, consumption, and law transformed social relations (Blackett 2003). By the twentieth century, the pre-eminent meaning of brand was overtly commercial and targeted on consumers (Trentmann 2004).

In the process, the brand has crisscrossed nature wherever feasible and profitable to do so. It has been a means by which to romanticise the wealth of nature drawing on discourses of beauty, purity and innocence (Slater 2003). Indeed, it is the rich discursive potential of nature’s products – a mirror in which to reflect all manner of human desire and calculation – that presents brand makers with bountiful opportunities (yet something apparently missed by the ‘guru’ of modern capitalism, Adam Smith: see Jonsson, this volume). Yet such opportunities require use of complex tools to manage brands from first production of a good to its ultimate consumption.

Three ‘tools’ concern us here: science, violence and marketing. *Science* has long played mid-wife to the birth of a brand. ‘Objective’ truth in science has helped to build brand identities based on such things as ‘proof’ of disease prevention, product quality or product purity. Science thus provides ‘facts’ about a product that render it desirable to consumers. *Violence* has long links to brands. It too is multifaceted: murder, injury, imprisonment, lawsuits, ‘sweatshop’ labour, livestock branding and slaughter, tree felling, ‘collateral’ ecological damage, etc. Whether disciplining people or disrupting nature, the aim is to create production and consumption conditions fit for brand growth. *Marketing* is the best-known tool today. Here we enter a world of intangible ideals, consumer research and brand placement – divining what consumers want or can even be taught to want. The choice of a logo, a colour scheme, packaging or self-help messages – all help to communicate desire, fantasy and aspiration.

The case of teak (mainly from Burma) illustrates some of the ways in which science, violence and marketing come together in making a brand – a case to which this chapter now turns.

Science of ‘superior’ teak

Scientists helped crystallise perceptions of teak as the world’s premier timber by providing a raft of ‘facts’ about its legendary properties even as they oversaw the systematic creation of the branded forest in which it grew. Yet knowledge was fragmentary. How extensive were the forests? Could teak be planted and how did it grow best? What were its key properties and how could these be matched to commerce?

The British imported scientific forestry to Burma in the nineteenth century to answer such questions. A bureaucracy was created in which foresters disseminated state-of-the-art knowledge about teak. Such knowledge facilitated central control even as it contributed to a mystique about that “most valuable of all known timbers” (Brandis 1888, 103).

Colonial foresters thus turned their scientific gaze on Burma’s forests. One urgent activity, especially in a local context of chronic instability and violence, was to map all forest in which teak was found. As such, considerable effort was expended in ascertaining precisely where those forests were. The result was a detailed mapping of Burmese teak that pinpointed core areas (Figure 1).

***** Figure 1: Teak forests of Burma**

Working plans spelling out what timber was to be cut when and where, as well as under what conditions complemented such maps. A process of ‘internal territorialisation’ was thus undertaken with momentous ramifications for people and forests. Teak-bearing forests became ‘reserved forests’ – the production home of this high-value tree.

Another urgent activity was the need to assert direct control over the trees themselves. Fortunately, a traditional system of branding was in place. A royal tree since the eighteenth century, it was forbidden to fell or damage teak except with royal approval. That approval was signified by the girdling (ring barking) of mature teak – a process that branded *and* killed the tree in preparation for commercial extraction that would follow after two years of further seasoning on the stock (Figure 2).

***** Figure 2: Girdling (ring-barking) of teak**

This system had its advantages (Nisbet 1901). First, branding was vital in regulating use in multi-species forests as it served to mark teak trees as government property (but still did not prevent theft, see Baden-Powell 1874, 17; Burma Forest Department 1899, 8). Second, girdled teak was easiest to extract. Timber needed to be hauled to streams by elephants and then floated to saw-mills – since girdled teak was lighter than green teak, it was easier to haul and float.

Finally, scientists suggested *commercial* benefits inasmuch as girdling resulted in timber of superior quality to that derived from green teak. There was dissent (e.g., Government of India 1868). Yet, according to Brandis (1888, 103-104), the case was clear:

The principal value of teak timber ... is its extraordinary durability ... once seasoned, teak timber does not split, crack, shrink, or alter its shape. In these qualities it is superior to most timbers. In contact with iron, neither the iron nor the teak suffers, and in this respect it is far superior to oak. It is not very hard, is easily worked, and takes a beautiful polish. It has great elasticity and strength, and is not very heavy ... [yet] being exposed to the wind and to the action of the sun, the timber of a girdled tree seasons more rapidly and more completely than that of a tree felled green.

This argument was persuasive precisely because it interwove scientific knowledge, aesthetic sensibilities, and commercial preference. The argument about durability was vital since this was prized by wood-workers.

Colonial science thus underlay teak's emerging brand status. Indeed, an army of scientists experimented on teak and other wood to ascertain their strength, density, yield, and texture. This process was designed to compare them with each other as well as to ascertain how different growing conditions and harvesting arrangements affected those properties (Simmonds 1885; Gardiner 1942). For some, the virtues of teak were overstated. Baden-Powell (1873a, 5) criticised "indiscriminating demand" for teak, urging his colleagues to promote other trees instead (Baden-Powell 1873b). Time and effort was devoted to this task (e.g., Ribbentrop 1900; Rodger 1921). Timber lists were even sent to merchants with phrases such as 'equally useful with teak' or 'stands next to teak' (Simmonds 1885; Howard 1923).

This effort came to nought. As Brandis (1888, 103) put it: "Great efforts have been made to find substitutes, but no timber has been brought to market in sufficient quantities combining the many valuable qualities which teak possesses." Gardiner (1942, 653-654) added that, "of the 200/300 kinds of timber trees found in Burma, teak ... holds pride of place ... [and] the utility of the timber depends not on one outstanding quality but on a combination of several". Thus, despite fears over substitutes (such as concrete and plastic), the demand for teak held up well (Hopwood 1935). Exports in 1940 were at record levels – 460,000 tons per annum – and worth a then staggering sum of about £2 ¼ million (Morehead 1944, 58; Scott 1945, 83). Accounting for 75% of world trade, Burma teak was "the commercial product of outstanding importance and value in the pre-war years" (Burma Forest Department 1947, 10).

That Burma's forests were enormously valuable despite the spread of substitutes suggested that teak was somewhat insulated from the vagaries of the market precisely because it enjoyed brand status. Science played its part here, but so too did violence.

Violence in the branded forest

The branded forest is often a 'violent environment' (Peluso and Watts 2001). Rather than settling conflicts, branding tends to sharpen differences and encourage violence against people and trees. Burma's teak forests are a case in point as resource militarization and structural violence went hand in hand to blight life there (cf. Peluso and Vandergeest, this volume).

Those forests were home to many who opposed the nation's rulers in pre-colonial and colonial times. As "a traditional hiding-place for malcontents" (Foucar 1956, 72), they were rife with 'bandits' and would-be revolutionaries (Maung Maung 1976). The capture of teak logs was a favored practice providing a powerful shot in the arm to cash-poor insurgents. Forest officials were targeted and sometimes killed, as were villagers dragged into the violence.

Yet such violence appeared modest when compared with the extreme conditions that existed after independence in 1948. Teak forests thus became the focus of strategizing by insurgent armies intent on capturing lucrative revenue. Notable among them were the Karen, an ethnic minority group that launched a rebellion against the Burman-controlled state shortly after independence. Indeed, their sixty-year struggle to establish a sovereign state was partly reliant on such revenue, especially after the 1960s when they were pushed back to the Thai border by the Burmese army (Bryant 1996).

But it was the Burmese state that turned the teak forests into veritable killing fields. Central control of the forests had always been a hit and miss affair, even under the British. The early post-colonial years were worse though. Indeed, the beleaguered government mounted a large-scale military campaign, 'Operation Teak', in which army units secured the Sittang River between Toungoo and Rangoon so that teak could be rafted to Rangoon (*The Nation*, November 10, 1955).

Violence increased further following the 1962 military coup, as livelihoods were disrupted and residents sometimes forced to bear arms. A counter-insurgency campaign was launched that targeted those who lived in or near the forests and was designed to deprive insurgents of local food, funds, intelligence and recruits (Smith 1999). This campaign was effective – the Burmese army swept all before it. Teak was indeed an important part of the army's strategizing here (Global Witness 2003). Hence, a campaign of terror was accompanied by large-scale extraction that led to rapid forest depletion.

The systematic structural violence that was embedded in the elaboration of scientific forestry practices beginning in colonial times added to the mayhem. Indeed, in important respects, this process was even more transformative of the social life of the teak forest than the resource militarization just discussed. It was vital, too, to the cultivation of Burma's teak brand.

Much of what transpired under scientific forestry was designed to introduce 'government' in the sense of the term meant by Michel Foucault – (self) disciplining practices, widespread surveillance, and the elimination of 'antithetical' behavior (Dean 1999). In Burma, as elsewhere, it entailed inter-linked processes of generating forest maps, resource inventories, and population censuses that provided a basis for draconian restrictions on popular access to forest products. These restrictions prompted popular resistance of many kinds.

Conflict was often most intense in teak forests. To reside in or near to them was to invite systematic state intervention because regulating teak involved promoting 'good conduct'. The creation of reserved forests was particularly intrusive. Reserve borders transgressed existing settlements and land uses while disciplining people – *where* they could go, *when* they could go there and *what* they could do whilst there. Yet such procedures were essential to the quality control measures that officials put in place in the forest to ensure that teak was extracted only under what were believed to be the best possible conditions – conditions in turn propitious for brand development.

One example that illustrates this process relates to the fire prevention campaign mounted in reserves in the late nineteenth century in the (mistaken) belief that fire always harmed teak. This campaign sought to restrict such local practices as game hunting, cattle grazing or honey gathering involving fire. Not surprisingly, it was bitterly resisted. Such resistance joined with growing scientific doubts over the utility of the campaign leading ultimately to its demise in the early twentieth century (Slade 1896; Walker 1908).

Yet in its heyday fire prevention was one of *the* key ways in which foresters sought to safeguard the quality of teak. Still, it was a serious burden on villagers. On the one hand, fire-related restrictions were a source of considerable *individual* concern. Villagers needed to alter their practices or ensure that those practices were hidden from view. There was too the threat that they might be captured for violations – and ignorance of the law was no defense given publicity surrounding the campaign. Much depended on the response of forest officials and local magistrates. The latter were keen to moderate punishment mindful of potential unrest. Nonetheless villagers were punished: a 500-rupee fine, six months in prison or both.

On the other hand, fire prevention was also a serious *collective* burden. Villagers were required to help fight fires whatever their provenance. Not only did this involve entire villages in unpaid dangerous work, it also meant that they needed to drop at short notice their own livelihood activities. British complaints of peasant ‘indolence’ and ‘negligence’ were legion – suggesting just how much of a collective imposition it was.

The branding of teak linked violence to teak extraction as never before. Yet until very recently, teak’s local reputation as a ‘blood’ timber was kept from wider view thanks to artful marketing and consumer affection for the ‘king of woods’.

A little bit of Empire: consuming teak

Teak consumption was profoundly shaped by how it was marketed commencing with British rule. At first the focus was largely military. By the early nineteenth century, quality oak was all but gone even as the superiority of teak over oak in naval construction was clear (Lambert 1996). Burmese teak thus played a key role in producing warships built in British shipyards. By the 1920s, though, modern shipbuilding techniques and a small fleet meant that official requirements decreased sharply (Albion 1926; Andrews 1931).

By then, however, teak was becoming a stylish consumer item. This process was related to the spread of imperialism: love of teak was linked to love of empire. Indeed, its utility and cachet was such that the British Empire cloaked itself in teak: its merchant ships and passenger liners, its railway ties, carriages and bridges, its important public buildings, even its social spaces. Writing about Burma where he served between 1922 and 1928, Orwell (1987, 17-18) described the European Club as “a teak-walled place” that was “the real seat of the British power” There was also the symbolism of it all – by cloaking itself in one of the world’s most expensive and durable woods, the message was clear: the British Empire too would endure.

Imperial symbolism and middle-class distinction (Bourdieu 1984) went hand in hand. Teak served as a marker of social distinction in the homes, gardens and bureaus of the affluent. Four factors underlay this development. First, there was the demonstration effect as elites became aware of the aesthetic beauty of teak from having seen it in colonial offices, railway carriages, and on board passenger vessels. That teak was

embedded in symbols of imperial modernity (e.g., railway, passenger liner) added to its allure. Both of the world's largest liners in 1939, the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth, for example, contained about 1,000 tons of teak used for decking, gangways, handrails and window frames (Gardiner 1942). Second, there was the way in which the prospering British middle classes came to prize quality possessions as markers of moral 'respectability'. As Cohen (2006, xv) notes, such consumerism gathered pace as the British became obsessed with shopping for goods (including luxury furniture and fittings) that formed part of a process of "middle-class self-fashioning". Third, there was the close association of Burma teak with a sense of adventure and the exotic – peddled in journalistic accounts (e.g., Geary 1886), guidebooks (e.g., Ferrars and Ferrars 1900; Kelly Talbot 1912), and personal memoirs (e.g., Williams 1950). To consume teak was to imbibe a 'glorious' history of imperial adventure. Finally, there was sheer practicality of teak as a long-lasting timber that displayed little shrinkage in drying and very little subsequent movement in variable climates. These properties meant that it was ideal, for example, as a piece of garden furniture or even as decking and fittings for yachts (Scott 1945).

Teak first made its social mark in the tropics. Not only were supplies relatively close by, but also the wood was one of the few timbers immune to white ants. Teak was thus used in building the bungalows that were home to both colonial officials and indigenous elites: window frames, verandas, roof trusses and shingles, doors, panelling, flooring and furniture. Similarly, the social world where colonial and sometimes local elites mingled was often framed by this wood: in the case of the Royal Bombay Yacht Club, the ceiling, flooring, panelling, staircase and tables were all made from teak (Gardiner 1942).

The imperial heartland also fell under the spell of teak. Teak panelled and floored offices became a hallmark of quality and success in the business world. Even in America, where supplies of local hardwoods were still available, the Ford Institute Museum in Detroit completed just prior to the Second World War was decked out in teak – covering an area of 340,000 square feet, this was then the largest single expanse of teak flooring in the world (Gardiner 1942). But the affluent household also acquired a taste for teak. Interiors were kitted out with teak flooring, panelling, stairways, window seats, doors and fire surrounds (Morehead 1944). Yet teak really came into its own in the back garden. Here, teak furniture added an exotic touch of class to 'landscapes of privilege' (Duncan and Duncan 2004) already moulded by a British passion for exotic plants (Casid 2005; Wulf 2008). At a more modest level, teak ornaments added an exotic touch to the imperial living room – at the 1938 Glasgow world exhibition, "many thousands of hand-carved teak elephants, carved ash trays, flower bowls, labelled 'genuine Burmese teak,' [were] eagerly purchased by the public" (Myat Tun 1938, 808). There was thus 'a little bit of empire' in many a home.

The Second World War interrupted the steady march of teak into the offices, homes and gardens of the imperial heartland. Indeed, and as noted earlier, violence begat violence in the post-colonial era such that the supply of Burma teak to the international market was fitful and much reduced from pre-war levels (Bryant 1997). By the early 1990s, though, conditions were propitious for the return of teak. The Burmese army had defeated most of the insurgents arrayed against it; while ever-closer links with China enabled large-scale timber exports despite a Northern boycott campaign against Burma's

brutal military regime (Global Witness 2003). Meanwhile, middle-classes around the world rediscovered the aesthetic beauty and practicality of teak – above all in the garden and yachting sectors. Imports of (mostly Burmese) teak into affluent countries climbed rapidly and amounted to an estimated \$37 million per year to the US alone after the turn of the millennium (and worth \$100 million per year in consumer purchases there) (EarthRights International 2005, 2).

Seemingly in only a few years, a comfortable outdoor lifestyle was predicated on the stylish teak dining set, garden bench, deck, and lounge chair. Teak was thus once more part of elegant modern living (Figure 3).

***** Figure 3: Teak and stainless steel sun lounge chair**

As one recent marketing pitch suggested, it was all in the attitude:

Choose a space under the open sky and make it your own. In a hectic world, Gloster lets you create an environment that is not confined by walls, but defined by a sense of personal space, an oasis of peace, relaxation and freedom. View the outside as an extension of your home, an expression of your individual style, every bit as important as any other room in the house, and then furnish it with beautiful things. Choose from teak, metal, sling or woven furniture in a variety of styles, from the traditional to the contemporary. And remember, outside is a far tougher environment than inside, so accept nothing but the best: Gloster (n.d., 1).

Meanwhile, Asia's hard-working middle-classes were enjoined to pamper themselves with a bit of well-earned luxury. In Singapore, for instance, one marketing campaign encouraged them to buy teak furniture so as to be able to "enjoy resort living in your own home" (Teak and Mahogany 2005, 79).

For those with money and a maritime disposition, the yachting industry is awash with teak. As in colonial times, yachts are today kitted out with teak fittings, cockpits, doors, decks and trimming – supplied by specialist suppliers such as Jamestown Distributors and East Teak Trading Group (both in the US) and Teak Decking Limited in the UK. And yet, the industry is much bigger than in earlier times as yachts (and power boats) become integral to the lives of the affluent. Indeed, the size of yachts gets ever bigger – with the rich and famous at the top end of the market outdoing one another in the race to have the biggest and best. Teak remains a favourite despite a wide array of non-wood substitutes. As Teak Decking Limited (2007, n.p.) asserts, this is because it will uniquely "provide unmistakable lasting beauty, adding value and character to any boat". Here, the teak brand shines brightly among the marketing agents, ships chandlers and yachting enthusiasts – as debate happily revolves around technical and aesthetic merits highly reminiscent of the imperial scientific foresters of old. Here, thoughts about the dark side of teak are banished in a modern romanticized narrative designed purely to enhance the consumption experience.

Conclusion

This chapter suggested that the fate of the branded forest is as multifaceted as the brand dynamics that swirl around it. The branding of nature is not new, and in its elemental form, long predates the modern industrial brand that riles the anti-globalization

movement so (Klein 2000). Yet in certain cases, such as teak, the modern world of branding – with all of its culturally resonant connotations of consumer distinction, differentiation and privilege – has also penetrated the world of nature. Diverse tools of branding – herein described as science, violence and marketing – are brought to bear in the effort to build the brand. The social life of the forest is thereby irrevocably altered.

If this chapter mainly served to illustrate the dark side to branding the forest, it remains to be seen whether this multidimensional phenomenon that helps to shape many aspects of the modern world can be a force for good in an era of growing social and ecological disruption. Is modern branding antithetical to the promotion of social equity and sustainable ecological practices? If so, and there is certainly evidence to that effect as this chapter indicated, then ‘anti-branding’ must be part-and-parcel of ‘anti-globalization’ struggles. Other examples of branded nature – ranging from mahogany wood in Brazil’s Amazon to Blue Mountain coffee grown in the highlands of Jamaica – do not augur well (e.g., Booth 2008). And yet, other cases – for example in Italy linked to the branding of fabled agricultural products such as Parmesan cheese and Parma ham – suggest the possibility of a more nuanced picture based on location-specific factors such as well-organised trade cooperatives and sympathetic laws like the European Union’s Protected Description of Origin Law. Indeed, is there even room, for instance, to deploy in a systematic manner modern branding techniques to the promotion of fair trade and organic products – thereby giving a sector still plagued by ‘amateurish’ marketing a much needed boost (for example, Menzies this volume)? Clearly, much work remains to be done in order to grasp the full implications of the brand including the ways in which it marks – for good and bad – both people and nature in the modern era.

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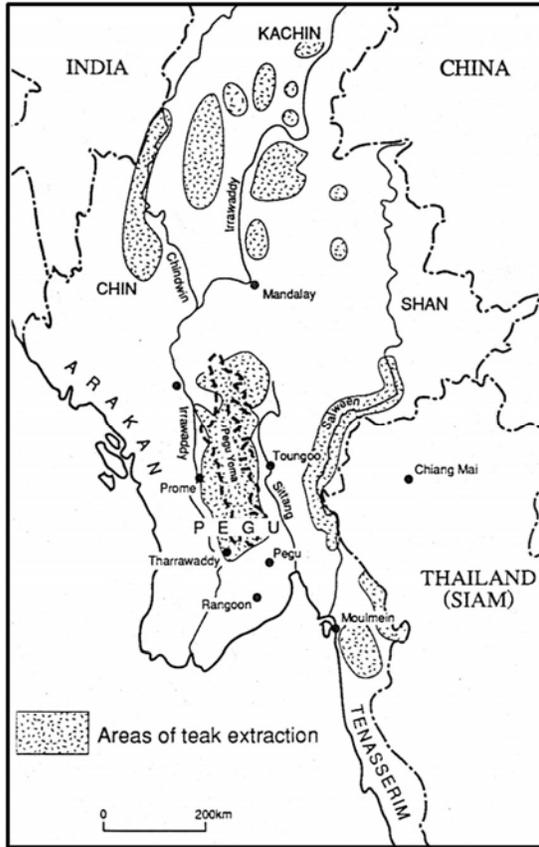


Figure 1: Teak forests of Burma



Figure 2: Girdling (ring-barking) of teak



Figure 3: Teak and stainless steel sun lounge chair