

BOOK REVIEW

Samir Boumediene. *La colonisation du savoir. Une histoire de plantes médicinales du “Nouveau Monde” (1492–1750)*.
Vaulx-en-Velin: Éditions des Mondes à
Faire, 2016. 477 pp.
ISBN: 978-2-9555738-1-5

Laia Portet-Codina

Faculty of History, Cambridge University

lp466@cam.ac.uk

What is a medicinal plant? What does it take to move from discovering the properties of a plant to finding the exact dosage to cure singular body ailments? How come did an indigenous plant from the humid forests of Central America become a popular medicine in Western Europe? And how did people from different places relate to the same remedy? In this thoroughly documented and tastefully illustrated book, Samir Boumediene answers these questions and more by following the tortuous trajectories of a set of medicinal plants of the “New World” and uncovering their role in the Spanish colonization of America.

This is a book about the intricate relationship between knowledge, power and domination or, in Boumediene’s own words, “a political history of the transformative power of plants” (p. 31). The first two parts of the book explore the histories of those American medicinal plants which were successfully transferred to Europe, paying special attention to the politics of movement and communication. The third part of the book, conversely, discusses the medical and the non-medical by looking at plants prohibited by Spanish theologians and inquisitors as part of a

wider combat against superstition, magic, and divination. Here, plants like *peyotl*, *pulque* and *coca* direct the discussion toward the “problem of the invisible” brought about by the arrival of American plants in Europe –a major issue sitting at the heart of medical debates between Galenists, Paracelsians, and Cartesians-, as well as toward the intimate relationship between drugs and indigenous culture, and the imposition of policies concerning the consumption of these products in Central America by religious, royal, and local authorities.

Unlike most scholarship on the subject, this book does not take for granted the successful acceptance of American plant products as medicines in Europe. On the contrary, it revolves around the ever-evolving and coexisting opinions and attitudes that defined the different fates of American drugs in the early modern period. In this respect, the originality of Boumediene’s discourse relies on his fresh and compelling analysis of the process of encounter and assimilation that preceded the globalization of the trade and consumption of American plants, on the one hand, and on his careful consideration of the instances of their commodification and commercialization, on the other.

After a brief introductory note on Galenism and European medical practise, the author approaches the appropriation of the American pharmacopoeia in the early 16th century and the exportation of “New World” simples through the Galleon route in competition with the traditional spice trade. The histories that the author tells about tobacco, cocoa, *ipecacuanha*, *guaiac* and, particularly, the *cinchona* bark explore in detail the ideas that were communicated from the “New World” to Europe and vice versa, the controversial acceptance of indigenous *savoir* as reliable, curious and practical knowledge by the Spanish, as well as the information that was kept in secret, discredited, lost or ignored. Although Boumediene is certainly not the first to point out that American plants forced Europeans to reconsider not only the medical, financial, and political value of the unknown, but also their own understanding of illness and the body, his excellent primary sources and analysis do give an extra layer of complexity to this argument. Inquisitorial processes, missionary reports, colonial questionnaires, unpublished manuscripts, correspondence, reedited and translated books, images, works of art, and a vast array of unknown archival materials from both shores of the Atlantic are confronted with each other in a well-thought effort to move the silenced American indigenous from the periphery to the core of history. It is, however, with the cases of Nicolas Monardes, Francisco Hernández, and Juan de Oviedo that the author dives into the politics of knowledge underpinning the Atlantic economy and the early Spanish empire (1492-1570) emphasizing the importance of information blockage to both.

In this respect, the author signals the decades of 1570 and 1580 as the turning point in the spread of American products and knowledge over Europe as a direct consequence of the union of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns. With his focus on the Iberian Peninsula, Italy and Flanders, Boumediene finds in the early modern fashion for collecting the interplay of trade,

curiosity and patronage that sustained both monarchical and individual interest in exotic drugs and paved the way to their commodification. Most interestingly, observes the author, this period of accumulation of both materials and information led to the creation of a new and fragile balance between availability, use and monopoly that put the Spanish crown in a paradoxical situation. While denying the publication in the Iberian Peninsula of manuscripts concerning America and restricting their circulation to Europe, printers in Flanders and Italy (for the most) made these overprotected works available to the public.

To best illustrate the summit of American drugs in Europe and the power relations revolving around them, Boumediene narrows down his attention to the Jesuit bark –an exemplary case of the transformative impact of new drugs on European healing and knowing practices. By encompassing events that took place both in Central America and Europe, the author cleverly explains the tension between an increasing urgency to know the ways of living of the indigenous populations and their nature, and a growing necessity to control, possess and destroy their original lifestyle and environment. The consequences of the perception conflict between European colonizers and Indian communities in America is further explored in the last part of the book, where Boumediene ends his history of the colonization of *savoir* with an account of the relentlessly resisted and contested expropriation of American plants and indigenous medical knowledge. By the epilogue, Boumediene has largely succeeded in redefining the relevance of medical plants for the understanding of the early modern period at large while providing a provocative new approach to the history of colonization.