UPROOTING THE GARDEN:

AN EXPLORATION INTO STRATEGIES ON DECOLONISING PLANT NAMES

BY SARA CATHERINE SCHMIDT INTM, MSC, MA, NETWORK OF EUROPEAN ROYAL RESIDENCES

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Research question.

How are botanic gardens addressing the colonial legacies of plant names within their collections and research?

Background.

Starting from the 17th century botanic gardens served as a paradigm of biocolonial violence and exploitation, hiring plant-hunters to complete their collections with little regard for local knowledge and naming practices[1]. The subjugation of both plants and people, as well as the continuing use of exploitative Western agricultural models has caused a rift between humans and their natural surroundings and thus the loss of indigenous plant-based epistemologies[2].

The implementation of the binomial Linnaean system, consisting of a genus and species, advocated for the taming of nature through a strict classification system[3]. The name *Strelitzia reginae* was chosen to honour Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz and does little to convey the plant's provenance or uses to the Indigenous population[4]. Yet, the names chosen by colonial agents to honour themselves or their patrons have persisted and are widely used today.

Article 25, Recommendation V – Section D of the 1905 International Congress of Botany which took place in Vienna recommended botanists to avoid using "[…] names of barbarian languages, only if these names are frequently cited in travellers' books and present a pleasant form that adapts easily to the Latin language and to the languages of civilised countries"[5]. The Indigenous names of the plants European colonial agents desired and hunted, as well as the epistemologies they represented, were deemed unfit in the eyes of the Western science of botany; a science that sought to civilise and tame the "unknown" wilderness.

Nowadays, botanic gardens strive to educate the public on the climate crisis, and work on collaborations with other institutions to continue their cataloguing of the world's biodiversity. Some institutions have tried shedding their historical past, focussing solely on their scientific missions. However, other institutions are acutely aware of the many roles they have acquired throughout the centuries and aim to become spaces where natural and cultural heritage are entangled. It is through transparent and equal collaboration where decolonial strategies are at their strongest. Once reliant on colonial networks, these vegetal institutions are undergoing a transformation.

> "Nevertheless, in the garden , we perform the act of possessing. To name is to possess […]"[6]

Methodology.

Data collection regarding plant names was conducted by the author within a wider research framework dedicated to analysing how botanic gardens address contemporary issues related to climate change and colonialism. The key methods employed were literature-based research, interviews, and site visits to *Hortus botanicus* Leiden and *de Hortus* Amsterdam, *Kew Gardens* in London and J*ardin des Plantes* in Paris.

Key Findings.

The colonial legacies of plant names are addressed through various initiatives.

- Local plant names are displayed alongside the Linnaean classification at *de Hortus* Amsterdam. These names are left untranslated and work as a visual reminder to visitors that these plants are far away from their provenance. Issues arise when a multitude of local names are recorded. Which names should be privileged over others?



Examples of plant naming at *de Hortus* Amsterdam [picture taken by author, 10th of May 2025]

- In 2024 during the International Botanical Congress in Madrid, 64 per cent of attendees decided to change the name of more than 200 plant species due to their connection to racist language. The species epithet *caffra* - a racial slur - was changed to *affra* as a way of honouring its African origins[7]. Scientific names are not immune to critique and can be amended.

- The *Botanic Garden of the University of Potsdam*, which actively addresses its colonial ties through its postcolonial tour "Colonial continuities" works together with the *Botanical Garden in Zanzibar* to document plant species, which are then classified and named by the Zanzibar botanists. While still operating within an established colonial naming framework, local scientists are granted the authority of naming[8]. Both examples lead to the question of whether the Linnaean system can be dismantled or whether a system designed by a Swedish imperial figure can benefit botanists and locals from post-colonial countries too.

Conclusion.

Naming objects, things, people, continents etc. grants the power of possession. In the case of botanic gardens and botany as a whole, the issue of colonial and racist plant names raises questions on whether a deconstruction of the entire Linnaean system is required to fully decolonise the institution and the field of studies it supports. However, cross-cultural and -institutional collaboration and transparency about the colonial legacies of botany - which continue to affect post-colonial countries' relationships to nature - redistribute agency and promote the reintegration and appreciation of Indigenous plant-based knowledge. Decolonial and anti-colonial work is continuous and labour-intensive. Frameworks deemed *status quo* need to be regarded through another lens and reworked. The cooperation and equal exchange of knowledge and skills amongst professionals is the first step towards a productive discussion towards creating a botanic garden that includes all voices and narratives.

Bibliography.

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[8]This information was acquired through an interview with Dr. Michael Burkart, Curator at *Botanical Garden of the University of Potsdam*