

Editorial

Introduction—Plant Poiesis: Aesthetics, Philosophy and Indigenous Thought

Patrícia Vieira

Center for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, 3000-995 Coimbra, Portugal; pilmvieira@gmail.com

In a recent stay in Senegal, I had a chance to contemplate a baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*)¹ located in the Bandia Reserve, whose hollow interior had been used as a burial site. I was aware of the significance of certain trees in West Africa, including baobabs and kapoks, that often function as palaver trees, i.e., as a gathering place for the community to hold political meetings, social events and religious ceremonies². The term *palaver* derives from the Portuguese *palavra*—literally meaning “word”—and refers to the debates taking place on the shade of large trees observed by Portuguese mariners, traders and colonizers in voyages to Africa from the fifteenth century onwards (Ross 133) [1]. Palaver trees are places where communities congregate, often across social and religious divides. As an elder told me on the Senegalese island of Fadiouth, inhabited not only by Christians, who are in the majority, but also by a sizeable Muslim community³, islanders pray in different places, but they all come together socially under the same baobab tree.

Since palaver trees such as baobabs are gathering sites, they came to be linked to griots, a caste-like social group of storytellers, poets and musicians specializing in oral tradition who performed as genealogists and historians of a community in the shade of palaver trees (Wickens 51) [2]⁴. In Senegal, griot families were often connected to a lineage of rulers and sang praises of important chiefs, but they could also be outspoken in their criticism of those at public functions since their membership of the low-status poetic caste granted them impunity (Finnegan 98) [4]. Griots traditionally occupied an ambiguous social position as they were feared for being allowed to freely speak truth to power and, at the same time, despised for their low social standing. Due to their equivocal status, griots used to be denied burial in the soil for fear that this would cause crops to fail. Nor could their bodies be thrown into a river or the sea, so that waters would not be contaminated (Wickens 51) [2]. Therefore, they were often entombed in hollow baobabs that became natural funerary urns, such as the one I saw at Bandia Reserve (Ross 142, note 12) [1]. As if to underline the link between poetics, socio-political and sacred ceremonies, and vegetal life, the palaver trees under which griots exercised their art became their final resting places.

I began this Introduction with the connection forged between griots and certain baobab palaver trees in Senegal because it illustrates several of the topics discussed in the articles included in this Special Issue. Baobabs, a national symbol of Senegal⁵, embody the intricate connections between humans and plants from age immemorial. The trees are a source of sustenance, medicine and materials traditionally used in the everyday existence of Senegalese peoples. But, beyond their practical applications, baobabs also represent political power and communal life, translated into artistic displays by griot bards whose performances encapsulate the living memory and principles of a society. To what extent is a griot’s art impacted by the palaver baobab under which they perform, at the core of their community? How are human ethical and political principles determined by a tree that dominates public life? Does the identification between griots and baobabs, to the extent to



Received: 3 November 2025

Accepted: 7 November 2025

Published: 8 November 2025

Citation: Vieira, P. Introduction—Plant Poiesis: Aesthetics, Philosophy and Indigenous Thought. *Philosophies* **2025**, *10*, 124. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies10060124>

Copyright: © 2025 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

which the bodies of the former become part of the hollow body of the latter, not point to a wider indistinction between plant and human lives, memories and existences?

Anthropology scholarship has grown increasingly aware of the significance of vegetal life for Indigenous and other traditional communities the world over. More than useful sources of food and raw materials, plants are understood as ancestors, allies or foes, and teachers and are regarded as social beings with memory, intelligence and volition (Kohn, Cabral de Oliveira et al., Chao, among many others) [5–7]. Many traditional peoples consider plants to be close relatives such as parents or grandparents, with whom they share bodily and character traits, and their cosmological narratives reflect their views on plant life as a source of their lineage (Vieira) [8]. Some plants—including, for example, ayahuasca⁶ or peyote in Indigenous communities in the Amazon River Basin and in Mexico, respectively—are considered spiritual guides for their entheogenic properties and their use in ritual and shamanic ceremonies, the goal of which is often to keep the balance of human and more-than-human communal life. As multispecies ethnography (Helmreich and Kirksey) [9] has amply shown, for many traditional societies, plants are, like the baobabs in Senegal, the cornerstone of social and spiritual life.

Recent ethnographic scholarship on the manifold ties binding plants and peoples in different parts of the world chimes in with the development of plant studies within the environmental humanities. Following in the footsteps of research on plant biology revealing that vegetal life displays capacities previously thought to be the purview only of humans and some animals (Chamovitz, Mancuso, Gagliano et al., Trewavas, etc.) [10–13], plant studies have sought to reevaluate the role usually ascribed to plants in Western cultures as a mere background for human action. While philosophers (Hall, Marder, Coccia) [14–16] questioned the anthropocentric bias that has been a hallmark of Western thought, literature, film and arts scholars (Laist, Cooper, Ryan, Aloï) [17–20] have emphasized the agency of plants in shaping human cultural productions and foregrounded their role in determining human cultural life.

The articles in “Plant Poiesis: Aesthetics, Philosophy and Indigenous Thought” showcase innovative research in the fields of multispecies ethnography and plant studies and offer novel contributions to rethinking plant–human connections. The essays cover a broad period of time, from the Middle Ages to the present, and focus on vegetal life from disparate geographical locations, from North and South America to Asia. Drawing on insights from dendrochronology, critical physical geography, anthropology, philosophy, semiotics, history, and literary, film and art studies, the texts reveal multiple instantiations of the imbrication between human and plant lives and the vitality of scholarship on plant studies today.

In “Extra-Botanical Capacities: Plant Agency and Relational Extractivism in Contemporary Amazonia,” Karen Shiratori and Emanuele Fabiano home in on two plants, cinchona (*Cinchona officinalis*) and matico (*Piper aduncum*), to discuss plant agency and subjectivity from the perspective of Amazonian Indigenous peoples. Through an ethnographic analysis of shamanic and artistic experience, Shiratori and Fabiano argue that plants are part of both kinship and predation relations and overflow the confines of Western biological categories. Patrícia Vieira’s essay “*Phytometamorphosis: An Ontology of Becoming in Amazonian Women’s Poetry About Plants*” also focuses on the ties binding Amazonian peoples to plants. Vieira examines the work of Colombian author Anastasia Candre Yamacuri (1962–2014) and of Peruvian poet Ana Varela Tafur (1963–). She argues that their work highlights vegetal life’s metamorphoses and the ontology of becoming central to Amazonian peoples, which is at risk of disappearing with the ongoing devastation of the rainforest.

Keith Williams and Andrée-Anne Bédard’s essay “Relationality and Metaphor—Doctrine of Signatures, Ecosymbiosis, and Interspecies Communication” discusses the

doctrine of signatures as a semiotic system of communication. Drawing on Indigenous thought, ecosemiotic theory and lyric philosophy, the authors argue that the doctrine of signatures offers insights into the interconnectedness of humans and plants. In ““I Was Born!”: Personal Experience Narratives and Tree-Ring Marker Years,” Nick Koenig and Erin James also suggest alternative approaches to the study of human–plant relations. They argue for tree-ring dating as a type of material dating that eschews imperial history and focuses instead on communal engagement and tree agency. The authors give an example of material dating to demonstrate how this can be replicated by other scholars.

In “The Fruit of Contradiction: Reading Durian through a Cultural Phytosemiotic Lens,” John C. Ryan draws equally on semiotics and cultural studies, or cultural phytosemiotics, to examine the historical, cinematographic, and literary narratives linked to the Southeast Asian fruit durian. He argues that the fruit, which often smells and tastes strange to those unacquainted with it, embodies the otherness of plant life depicted in human cultural productions. Similar to Ryan’s essay, Joela Jacobs “Vegetal Delights: The Phytopoetics of Ross Gay,” focuses on cultural production on and with plants. The article interprets contemporary American poet Ross Gay’s two-volume *Book of Delights* (2019 and 2023) and argues that his texts are phytopoetic, i.e., they represent a process of co-creation involving plants and the poet and invite readers to encounter plants anew. In “Other Intelligences: Investigating the Plant-Human Relationship in Domestic Spaces,” Alfredo Ramos, Maria Castellanos and Ernesto Ganuza also discuss plant agency and performance in human cultural productions. They analyze the artwork “Other Intelligences” by Maria Castellanos and Alberto Valverde and examine how people change their views on plants as inert beings after interacting with the work, thus showing how art can contribute to challenging preconceived ideas about vegetal life.

The transdisciplinary nature of the articles in this Special Issue foregrounds the eco-cultural interconnectedness of plants and humans. By challenging conventional views on plants, the essays open new pathways for understanding the agency, meaning and significance of vegetal existence in determining human imaginaries and the ways in which plants and humans co-create common experiences.

Funding: This article is part of the project ECO, funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 101002359).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Baobabs (*Adansonia* genus) are native to Africa, Madagascar and Australia. The baobab species usually found in Africa is *Adansonia digitata*.
- ² As Ross points out, “[t]rees were considered the ‘souls’ of West African polities [. . .]. They represented the unity and destiny of a community as a whole” (137).
- ³ While the population of Senegal is overwhelmingly Muslim, Christians are the majority on Fadiouth island.
- ⁴ For a detailed account of griots and their role in West African societies, see Hale [3].
- ⁵ A baobab features prominently in the country’s coat of arms and other state symbols.
- ⁶ The term ayahuasca designates both the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the entheogenic brew made by macerating and mixing it with plants containing DMT, the most common of which is *Psychotria viridis*.

References

1. Ross, E.S. Palaver Trees Reconsidered in the Senegalese Landscape: Arboreal Monuments and Memorials. In *African Sacred Groves: Ecological Dynamics and Social Change*; Sheridan, M.J., Nyamweru, C., Eds.; Ohio University Press: Athens, OH, USA; James Currey: Oxford, UK, 2008; pp. 133–148.
2. Wickens, G.E. *The Baobabs: Pachycauls of Africa, Madagascar and Australia*; Springer: Berlin/Heidelberg, Germany, 2008.

3. Finnegan, R. *Oral Literature in Africa*; Open Book Publishers: Cambridge, UK, 2012.
4. Hale, T.A. *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*; Indiana University Press: Bloomington, Indianapolis, 2007.
5. Kohn, E. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*; University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, USA, 2013.
6. Cabral de Oliveira, J.; Amoroso, M.; de Lima, A.G.M.; Shiratori, K.; Marras, S.; Emperaire, L. (Eds.) *Voices Vegetais: Diversidade, Resistências e Histórias da Floresta*; Ubu Editora: São Paulo, Brazil, 2020.
7. Chao, S. *the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua*; Duke University Press: Durham, UK, 2022.
8. Vieira, P.I.L. Animist Phytofilm: Plants in Amazonian Indigenous Filmmaking. *Philosophies* **2022**, *7*, 138. [[CrossRef](#)]
9. Helmreich, S.; Eben, K. The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography. *Cult. Anthropol.* **2010**, *25*, 545–576.
10. Chamovitz, D. *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses of Your Garden—And Beyond*; One World: Oxford, UK, 2012.
11. Mancuso, S. *The Revolutionary Genius of Plants: A New Understanding of Plant Intelligence and Behavior*; Atria Books: New York, NY, USA, 2017.
12. Gagliano, M.; John, R.; Patrícia, V. (Eds.) *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2017.
13. Trewavas, A. *Plant Behaviour and Intelligence*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2014.
14. Hall, M. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*; SUNY University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2011.
15. Marder, M. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*; Columbia University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2013.
16. Coccia, E. *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*; Polity Press: London, UK, 2019.
17. Laist, R. (Ed.) *Plants in Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies*; Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands, 2013.
18. Cooper, S., ed. Thinking Cinema—With Plants. Special issue of *Philosophies* **2023**, *8*:20. Available online: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/philosophies/special_issues/TCwP (accessed on 6 November 2025).
19. Ryan, J.C. *Plants in Contemporary Poetry and Culture: Eco-poetics, Plant Thinking, and the Vegetal Sublime*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2017.
20. Aloï, G. (Ed.) *Botanical Speculations: Plants in Contemporary Art*; Cambridge Scholars: Cambridge, UK, 2018.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.