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Nabhan, Gary Paul. *Cumin, Camels and Caravans*. (2014). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 332 pages. ISBN 978-0-520-26720-6 (hardcover)

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I doubt that Michel de Montaigne, the 16th Century author of the modern essay, would recognize few contemporary scholarly works as essayistic. He would either find them too self-indulgent, as in the case of most creative non-fiction whose authors pollute their intellectual observations with the litter of too much self-discovery, or hyper theoretical and scientific, as in the case of many academic books read, which too often read like warmed-over dissertations. And, yet, it is Gary Paul Nabhan's ability to move seamlessly from a first person account of retracing the ancient spice routes of Asia and Europe to real intellectual insight that combines his own expertise as an agricultural ethnobiologist and ethnobotanist that makes his *Cumin, Camels and Caravans* a great read, one that the Montaigne would appreciate.

Most historians and food critics will immediately recognize Nabhan's claim that the four ancient trade routes he examines—The Silk Road, the Frankincense Trail, the Spice Route, and the Camino Real—represent some of the earliest forms of globalization. Where Nabhan adds to this particular conversation is in his insistence that cultures that are often perceived struggling, if not warring, with one another have learned to work together harmoniously for centuries along these routes in ways that might be a model for resolving more global conflicts. This is particularly true of the desert Jews and Arabs, whose collaboration along these routes (which are still somewhat in existence) might be a multi-cultural template for solving many of the conflicts that currently plague the Middle East.

We hear Nabhan's own desire to understand the first forms of globalization when he states his own general reason for travelling to these desert regions to study and observe what remains of the itinerant spice trade: "I have come here to dig for the roots of globalization, if the roots of such an ancient and pervasive phenomenon can be traced at all." A few pages later, he fleshes this reason out, "For many years now, I have been preoccupied if not altogether consumed with finding out why some individuals, communities, or cultures have been content with staying home and savoring what immediately lies before them, while others have an insatiable desire to taste and see or even possess that which comes from afar. I have wondered why certain peoples culturally and genetically identified as Semitic—Minaeans and Nabataeans, Phoenicians and other Canaanites, Quraysh and Karimi Arabs, Radhanite and Sephardic Jews—have played disproportionately large roles in globalized trade, not merely over the short course of decades or centuries but over the long haul of many millennia." What makes this book essayistic, at least in the tradition of Montaigne, is that he does not offer a formal argument as a response to his purpose, but rather he makes numerous observations based on his travel through this land, his reading of scholarly and historical writings, and the experience of his own position as the W.K. Kellogg Endowed Chair in Sustainable Food Systems at the

University of Arizona Southwest Center that allow the reader to draw her own conclusions for what might be a more multi-cultural model for larger international conflicts.

To provide but one example, Nabhan arrives at the Jabal Samhan nature reserve in Dhofar, Oman, where he meets with local officials and observes the harvesting of the gum like resin of the *Boswellia sacra* tree, which is used to create Frankincense incense and perfumes. The resin is obtained by cutting into the tree to make it bleed. “How odd it is that the unforgettable fragrance of frankincense comes not from its flowers or fruits but from its wounds, as if it were one more saint like Francis of Assisi or Jesus of Nazareth with stigmata that drip with blood, sweat, and tears,” Nabhan asks as he observes one particular harvest. Immediately, he seems to suggest, though he does not state directly, instead allowing the reader to reach her own conclusion, that those who might form a larger multi-cultural model for international conflicts need first to understand the cultural, religious, and historical significance placed upon the smallest acts within these cultures, in this case, the harvest of a tree in Oman, whose resin will quickly enter a globalized trade route which will add to it more layers of cultural, religious, and historical significance.

To understand further these layers of significance of the harvest and later trade of the frankincense at a near-by souk, Nabhan consults as many sources as possible. He reaches back to Pliny the Elder, who described these frankincense groves, then meets with Ali Salem Bait Said, whose family has farmed these trees for centuries, and, finally, discusses with Dr. Mohamud Haji Farah the rituals surrounding the gathering and management of the resin, including the chanting, chastity oaths, and overall adherence of a belief in the supernatural powers of the trees. When at last he enters a souk in the port town of Salalah, where the tiny pieces of the Jabal Samhan harvest are bought and sold, we are able to conclude with Nabhan that the resins’ “economic and mythic value must be made to loom larger than the trade item itself, as well: if you can, carry to the far corners of the earth something as light as a feather that can linger in one’s memory forever, but eschew anything as dull and as heavy as lead. In other words, whenever feasible, trade in potent fragrances and flavors, for they are tangible corollaries of visions and dreams. They are intermediaries between the physical and spiritual domains, reminding us that there is more to the world that we can absorb through our eyes.”

Were that more books were written like this, combining personal observation with various diverse sources encountered along the way. In tracing the four spice routes, Nabhan offers us a beautiful and edifying account of the complexities of culture, not only the cultures that produced the various goods, but also the polyglot of cultures that came together to trade. In so doing, he invites us to think about how his observations along with the conclusions that he invites us to draw alongside him might be applied to other, larger global situations.

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