



Fig. 1: Detail of *Coix lacryma-jobi* seeds in an Amazonian body ornament, British Museum (Am1916,0306.2). Photo: Caroline Fernandes Caromano, 2022.

Faraway Asian Seeds to Embellish Amazonian Bodies

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With the process of colonial expansion, useful plants were transported to distant areas, introduced and adopted into distinct cultural systems. Spices, foods, medicines, and plants with multiple uses, such as those used for manufacturing body ornaments, were part of this circuit. Among them, the shiny Asian seeds of *Coix lacryma-jobi* found their way to the most diverse areas of the world, including the Amazonian rainforest. This article is an initial attempt to understand how this plant arrived in the Amazon and was incorporated by different Indigenous groups in distinct regions into their complex and particular systems of body ornaments manufacturing.

This text is an invitation for you, dear reader of *The Newsletter*, to investigate alongside me histories of the introduction of this very special plant in the Amazonian region. I do not intend to provide a definitive answer, but instead a set of clues that I have been collecting on this plant of worldwide importance. Perhaps some of you may even know more about the diverse stories related to it, and perhaps you can help me find more evidence about its arrival (or multiple events of arrival) in forests so far away from where this species originated.

For years I have been investigating the seeds used by Amazonian Indigenous Peoples to make their beautiful and intricate body ornaments.¹ Seeds with multiple colours and textures help to

create necklaces, bracelets, headbands, armbands, belts, anklets, aprons, bandoliers, and more. Together with body painting and feather work, these body ornaments form complex sets that not only contribute to culturally identifying the people who wear them, but indeed to constructing bodies under Indigenous perspectives and ontologies.

The selection of seeds that make up this diversity of body ornaments is influenced by aesthetic and cultural factors, by access and availability of the species, as well as by physical characteristics that can make a seed a good candidate for manipulation and transformation into beads.

Most of the seeds present in Amazonian body ornaments are of native species,

with palm fruits and the legume family being especially important. Some species – such as *Astrocaryum* endocarps and *Ormosia* seeds – are used by several Indigenous Peoples, while others are more culturally restricted.

Other used seeds, however, are not native to the Amazonian forest, being a testament to histories of human migration and cultural exchange with Indigenous peoples from outside of the Amazon, but also of non-Indigenous populations which, voluntarily or not, arrived in the largest rainforest in the world. Amongst these plants, the introduced seeds of *Coix lacryma-jobi*, in particular, are commonly present in body ornaments made nowadays by Indigenous peoples all around the Amazon [Fig. 1].

Origin and dispersion of *Coix lacryma-jobi*

To better understand the arrival of *Coix lacryma-jobi* in the Amazon, let me try first briefly to retrace its history of expansion, from its area of origin to other continents.

Coix lacryma-jobi is native to Asia, with a most likely origin in the Eastern Himalayan region and Northern Indochina (although archaeological evidences of its early presence in other areas have been showing a much more complex history). It is known for being a plant with ornamental, nutritional, and medicinal importance. Its hard seed coat is used as beads, while other varieties with a soft seed coat can be used as cereal grains.

Some of the earliest evidence on the use of the species was found in an ancient fermented beverage recipe found in archaeological sites in China dating back to 5000 years ago,² but seeds recovered in archaeological contexts in East Timor dated almost 14,000 years before the present.³ Moreover, microvestiges possibly from *Coix lacryma-jobi* found in an Upper Palaeolithic archaeological site in China date to 28,000 before the present,⁴ which may push its use by humans to much earlier periods.

Historical collections containing material culture from South Asia and Oceania highlight another characteristic of the plant: its ideal shape, with a natural hole running through its centre, makes it perfect for inserting a string and to be used as beads. One example is the broad use of *Coix lacryma-jobi* seeds by the Asmat People of New Guinea for the manufacture of a large number of body ornaments, such as armbands, belts, and necklaces.

The expansion of *Coix* species outside of Asia is related to ancient trade routes and the exchange and commercial exploitation of goods, including useful plant species. The first mention of the species in Europe is found in Pliny's *Natural History*, from the year 77 CE.⁵ During the early Modern Era, a very interesting register of its presence was made in Europe: a "show-off" specimen of *Coix lacryma-jobi* was included in Leonardo da Vinci's artistic portfolio of "muses" in the 16th century.⁶

In Northern Africa, the Roman harbour of Berenike, founded in 275 BCE in Egypt on the Red Sea coast near the present Sudanese border, presented evidence of *Coix lacryma-jobi* seeds, probably brought from India.⁷ The history of introduction and dispersal of the seed in

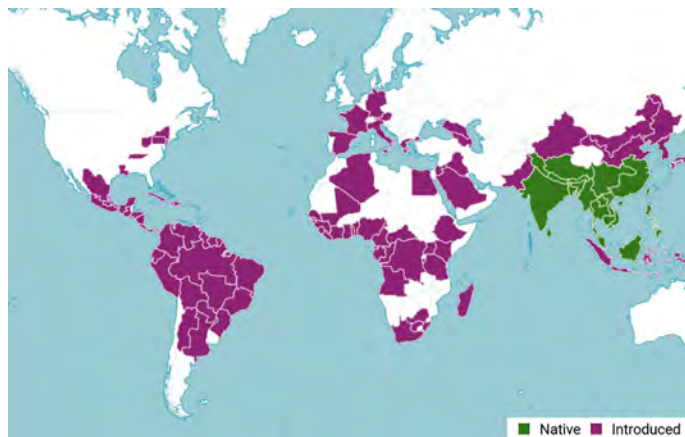
Sub-Saharan Africa is less clear, being probably introduced first into the eastern part of the region from India. The oldest herbarium record of the species in Africa was collected in 1847 on Mauritius island, and then in 1871 on La Réunion island. However, given its presence in the north of Africa much earlier, it is possible that these 19th-century dates do not represent the actual great antiquity of *Coix lacryma-jobi* on the continent.

With the colonial expansion to the Americas, *Coix lacryma-jobi* was introduced in the continent by Europeans, probably due to its multiple potential uses, such as a cereal grain to feed animals, as a medicine, and as raw material for the manufacture of crafts. With the imposition of Christianity, *Coix* seeds were also used in the manufacture of rosary beads.

Its religious use in the Americas, however, is much more diverse. In African systems of belief in Latin America, the *Coix* seed plays an important role, being one of the symbols of the Orisha *Obatalá* in the Caribbean and South America. The seed is frequently observed in necklaces related to this Orisha (a category which comprises the divine spirits or deities of the Yoruba religion of West Africa). Therefore, amongst the various possible pathways and waves in which *Coix lacryma-jobi* found its way to the Americas, one of these may have been through the hands of enslaved African individuals.

From its origin in Asia, the species is now present in over 90 countries across six continents (the only exception being Antarctica), found not only cultivated but also growing in the wild [Fig. 2]. Its history of human use spans thousands of years, ranging from medicinal purposes to its role as a 'famine food'. *Coix lacryma-jobi* is also frequently valued for its aesthetic qualities: in almost all contexts where it is cultivated, it is used as beads, including for manufacturing body ornaments.⁸

Fig. 2: Distribution of *Coix lacryma-jobi*. (Adapted from a map courtesy of POWO, Royal Botanical Gardens Kew), 2025.



Coix lacryma-jobi and the Amazon

After this brief journey to the history of *Coix lacryma-jobi* dispersion around the world, I will now turn to the matter at hand and explore the plant's particular relationship to the Amazon. I decided to investigate if historic ethnographic collections housed in European museums could provide clues into when this plant spread along the immense Amazonian region,⁹ and how it was incorporated by different Indigenous groups into their repertoire of seeds suitable for use in the composition of body ornaments.

My ongoing survey has so far indicated that the oldest Amazonian body ornaments with *Coix lacryma-jobi* seeds housed in museum collections date back to the second half of the 19th century. The oldest of these is a one-meter-long necklace (or bandolier) made of *Coix-lacryma* seeds, collected between 1876 and 1879 amongst the Wayana people in French Guiana by Jules Crevaux. This artefact is today found at the Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac (object number 71.1881.34.27).

The Quai Branly Museum is also home to two other 19th-century *Coix lacryma-jobi* body ornaments from French Guiana: a necklace with seeds intercalated with small blue European glass-beads, collected between 1880 and 1885 by Henri Coudreau (object number 71.1890.93.133), and a similar necklace from the same period and collector. Both of these artefacts, however, have no information regarding which Indigenous peoples they would have belonged to.

Outside of French Guiana and the Eastern Amazon region, the Western Amazon also presents *Coix lacryma-jobi* artefacts from the 19th century. In the Napo River (Ecuador), an armband composed of looped strands of grey *Coix lacryma-jobi* seeds and peccary teeth, and a pair of leg ornaments with



Fig. 3 (left): Examples of Indigenous body ornaments with *Coix lacryma-jobi* seeds in the Amazon: a) Wayana necklace, collected in 1907, Suriname, Wereldmuseum (TM-403-62), b) Ka'apor women's belt, collected in the 1960's, Brazil, Wereldmuseum (RV-4016-266), c) Tikuna necklace, collected in 2011, Brazil, Brazilian National Museum of Indigenous Peoples (11.2.18), d) Aén's Chicham chief's necklace, collected in the 19th century, Ecuador, British Museum (Am1916,0306.2). Map credits: Biogeographical limits of the Amazon's by RAISG, modified by the author. Photos: Caroline Fernandes Caromano, 2022 (a, c, d) and Wereldmuseum (b).

Coix lacryma-jobi seeds, peccary teeth and shells are not only testaments to the presence of this plant in the Western Amazon, but they are also examples of connections between the Andean foothills and the Amazonian rainforest. Collected from unidentified Indigenous groups by Edward J. Whymper on an expedition in 1880, these artefacts are today found at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology of the University of Cambridge, under object numbers E 1903.242 (armlet) and E 1903.239 (leg ornaments).

Also in the United Kingdom, a Aén's Chicham (formerly known as 'Jivaro') body ornament – a five-string necklace made entirely of *Coix lacryma-jobi* seeds – was collected by the entomologist Emily Mary Sharpe around 1890, in Western Brazilian Amazon, and is now housed at the British Museum under object number Am+6391.

From the border area between Ecuador and Peru, six body ornaments – also from Aén's Chicham individuals, collected between the late-19th and early-20th centuries, and kept at the former ethnographic collections of the University of Fribourg – have been identified: one necklace made with *Coix lacryma-jobi* and other seeds (object number 2022), four back ornaments with bird bones and seeds, including *Coix lacryma-jobi* (object numbers 2050-2053), and one apron with *Coix* and red seeds (object number 2048). Also from the Western Amazon and the same time period, a necklace made of *Coix lacryma-jobi* seeds with rodent and peccary teeth, collected at the Uaupés River by Theodor Koch-Grünberg on a 1903-1905 expedition, is now found at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (object number VB 5993).

Ethnographic collections are excellent sources of evidence on the presence of specific plants in the Amazonian past, since a large part of the Indigenous material culture preserved in museums is made from materials of natural origin present in local ecosystems (or introduced). Nevertheless, although the ethnographic collections were showing records of *Coix lacryma-jobi* in the Amazon dating back to the second half of the 19th century, I wasn't fully convinced



that these records were representative of the actual introduction dates of *Coix lacryma-jobi* in the Amazon.

The problem is that these artefacts are connected to European interest in collecting material culture and forming ethnographic collections, which only intensified from the 19th century onwards, and to the number of collecting expeditions undertaken, resulting in a much smaller number of materials from earlier periods and a probably limited view of the plants used by different Indigenous Peoples in the region.

While the aforementioned artefacts all date from the 19th century and later, other types of sources can help us trace back the introduction of *Coix lacryma-jobi* in the Amazon to earlier periods than those seen through the collections of Indigenous body ornaments. Regarding the introduction of this plant in the Americas (but outside of the Amazon), the species was possibly already in Mexico around 1571, as suggested by Hernández's accounts about the plants of Nueva España. Evidence of its arrival in the southern part of the American continent appears only two centuries later. For the Colombian Andean region, Jose Celestino Mutis, in his *Diary of Observations*, mentions having seen a living *Coix lacryma-jobi* plant in the town of Honda in 1761.

In the Amazon, the first register of *Coix lacryma-jobi* was also of a live specimen, collected by Aublet in French Guiana during his travels between 1762 and 1764.¹⁰ Likewise, a botanical drawing of the plant made by José Joaquim Freire, one of the members of the expedition led by Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira, was a testament of the presence of *Coix lacryma-jobi* in 1783 in the Brazilian Amazon. These reports demonstrate that this plant was already present and growing in the Amazonian region 100 years before their material presence on ethnographic artefacts.

The century-long difference in evidence of *Coix lacryma-jobi* in the Amazon, as observed between ethnographic collections and documents and botanical collections, could possibly be due to a non-adoption of Coix seeds by Indigenous Peoples for the manufacture of their ornaments (or other material cultures) before the 19th century; or, what is also quite likely and as previously mentioned, it is possible that the small amount of pre-19th-century museum collections may be biasing our results.

Although, I have not reached a conclusion as to when Coix seeds began to be used for body ornaments by Amazonian peoples, ethnographic

collections from more recent periods demonstrate that, from the 20th century onwards, this Asian seed became widely used by Indigenous Peoples throughout the Amazon.

The white and greyish Coix seeds began to be used in everyday ornaments, sometimes in simple or multi-strand necklaces, at other times forming complex designs accompanied by native seeds of multiple colours, textures, and sizes. Ornaments used by shamans and chiefs, exclusively worn by men or women, or other markers of social difference, have also come to include seeds of *Coix lacryma-jobi*. All across the Amazon, we can see examples of the use of this seed for the manufacture of body ornaments by Indigenous Peoples [Fig. 3].

Such diverse examples of the use of *Coix lacryma-jobi* is clear evidence of the adoption and inclusion of this Asian plant species into Amazonian Indigenous cultural systems. Furthermore, the selection of what composes the material culture which comes into contact with the body matters because these materials possess agency over human bodies,

contributing to the construction of the person who wears it.¹¹

Coix lacryma-jobi is a beautiful example of how an introduced species from faraway lands, with great importance for distinct cultures, circulated through continents and was adapted and adopted by distinct cultures in their own food, medicinal, and material culture systems. Much has been discussed about how certain plants from the Americas, such as maize and peppers, have made their way into Asian cultures. *Coix lacryma-jobi* invites us to reflect on the opposite flux of these movements, and to consider how Asian plants and cultures changed the Americas as well.

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Notes

- 1 I have been researching body ornaments in the Amazon since 2020, as part of my NWO Veni project "Seeds in Amazonian Body Ornaments: Encapsulated Indigenous Histories, Aesthetic and Environmental Knowledge" (VI. Veni.201C.030), and more recently as part of the NWA Consortium Grant awarded to the project "Decolonizing Epistemologies: The Reinterpretation of Existing Traditional Knowledge in Suriname".
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- 6 Da Vinci, L. A stem of Job's-tears. c.1510–15.
- 7 Vermeeren, C., Cappers, R.T.J. 1997/2002: Ethnographic and archaeobotanical evidence of local cultivation of plants in Roman Berenike and Shenshef (Red Sea coast, Egypt). BIAxiaal 140. Zaandam: BIA Consult.
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- 9 The artefacts mentioned were identified in the online databases of Wereldmuseum (NL), British Museum (UK), Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac (FR) and Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology of the University of Cambridge (UK). The objects from the former collection of the University of Fribourg were presented by Valentin Boissonnas in the article "Characterization and contextualization of a group of Aents Chicham (Jivaro) artefacts formerly in the theological department of the University of Fribourg, Switzerland". *Kunst & Kontext* (2024), 25: 10–28.
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