



Fig. 2. Saké bottle, Japan, 1927 (54677). (A. McRobb, RBG Kew.)

the traveller and tourist as they are, or could be, for specialists and museums. Many of them, particularly those used as containers, may be unadorned, or else have simple carved or pyro-engraved ornamentation (Fig. 1). Unusually, the Japanese one in Fig. 2 is painted in gold, featuring pendent racemes of (probably) *Wisteria* at the top and frogs in contrasting moods round the base. However, the Chinese gourd in Fig. 3 shows that not all of the immense morphological variation found in gourds is genetically based. Used as a cage for crickets (Orthoptera: Gryllidae), it was grown in a mould that also produced the characters ornamenting the surface.

But for how long will we keep the genetic diversity of the bottle gourd and see its morphological expression in the items of everyday life in many cultures? In widely scattered parts of the world, there have been declarations and descriptions (but not lamentations) of loss. In southern Nigeria, for example, Ibiok, Ndukwu, and Umoh (1991) noted a decline both in the traditional importance of gourds (e.g., as containers and for musical instruments) and in their cultivation; on tour in China Walters (1989), surprised at the lack of mature bottle gourds, was told that pottery had largely replaced gourds as

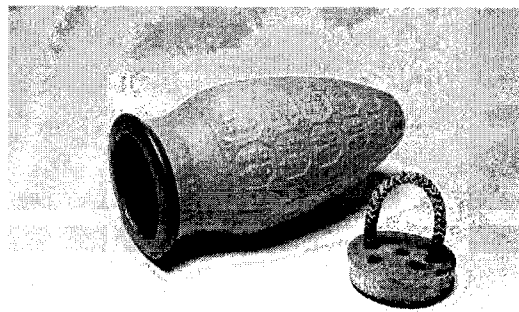


Fig. 3. Cricket cage, Beijing, China, 1878 (54647). Notes attached to this item (part of a pair) state: "The crickets carried in such cages are put into a conical shaped bowl. In climbing the sides they fall and striking (*sic*) each other fight vigorously." These fights were the basis for gambling. The character repeated on the side of the cage means 'happy', with particular reference to marriage. (A. McRobb, RBG Kew.)

containers; and in northern Brazil the Yanomami have taken to using aluminium pans instead of gourds for collecting water, although Milliken and Albert (1999) recorded how smaller gourds still retain other traditional functions.

Economic botanists are often concerned with the loss of, or drastic change to, some aspect of cultural or biological diversity. In Kenya, where they recorded over 30 cultivars of the bottle gourd, Maundu and Morimoto (1996) drew attention to the threat of modernisation to both gourd genetic diversity and gourd-related customs—but not to the disappearance of the gourds themselves. Various conservation organizations (e.g., Seed Savers Exchange and Native Seeds/SEARCH in the USA) and national (USDA) and international (CATIE, in Costa Rica) germplasm repositories maintain some of this species' genetic diversity in their *ex situ* collections. However, one looks in vain for concerns on the disappearance of the gourds themselves and what they might tell the future. On a small, informal scale, "gourd museums" can be found in off-the-beaten-path towns in some developed countries. Such collections are the pride and joy of their collectors, most of whom are self-taught horticulturalists or artisans, but are not trained as scientists or curators.

In his essay, *The Dodo in the Caucasus Race*, Gould (1999) writes about the task of the curator: "the assiduous collection, and meticulous

preservation, of remains—often so few, partial, and pitiful—of people, cultures, species, and places that have permanently disappeared”. He laments that “complex objects of history . . . must utterly disappear from human understanding unless we preserve a record of their actual existence.” Most curators work in museums, the great expansion of which occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century. An analysis of the bottle gourds in Kew’s Economic Botany Collections (EBC) supports the notion that this was also a great age of collecting. Of the 59 gourds in the EBC to which dates can readily be ascribed, 45 are from 1850–1899, and just seven from each of the two following half-centuries.

The wealth of uses to which the bottle gourd was put in the past is certain. Equally certain is that gourds are now disappearing fast—and yet, ironically, there is no organised attempt to save them and what they represent. It is time, perhaps, to develop a second golden age of collecting, under new “rules”, with new goals and aspirations, and based on hopes that the still surviving gourds of today will become just as recorded, curated and accessible as those we have

from the past. Just how this might be done remains a challenge for economic botanists.

LITERATURE CITED

- Gould, S. J.** 1999. Leonardo’s Mountain of Clams and the Diet of Worms. Essays on Natural History. Vintage, London.
- Ibiok, M. N., B. C. Ndukwu, and N. Umoh.** 1991. Varieties of gourds (*Lagenaria siceraria*) in Akwa Ibom State. *The Nigerian Field* 56:115–119.
- Maundu, P. M., and Y. Morimoto.** 1996. Interdependence of cultural and biological diversity: the case of the common gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*). Abstract in 5th International Congress of Ethnobiology. Ethnobiology and Conservation of Cultural and Biological Diversity. Nairobi, Kenya.
- Milliken, W., and B. Albert, with G. G. Gomez.** 1999. Yanomami. A Forest People. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.
- Walters, T. W.** 1989. Historical overview on domesticated plants in China with special emphasis on the Cucurbitaceae. *Economic Botany* 43:297–313.
- Hew D.V. Prendergast, Centre for Economic Botany, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 3AE, UK; Deena S. Decker-Walters, The Cucurbit Network, P.O. Box 560483, Miami, FL 33256, USA.*