4. A PUFF OF HISTORY

Ahmad Makia

I had my first cigarette when I was 12. It was my great-grandmother's funeral, and the room sectioned off for mourning for the women was held at my parents' house. I, a boy, was able to attend the function because my Adam's apple had barely taken shape yet. Coffee, tea, chocolate, dates, and a tray of cigarette packs were served as food items on the occasion.

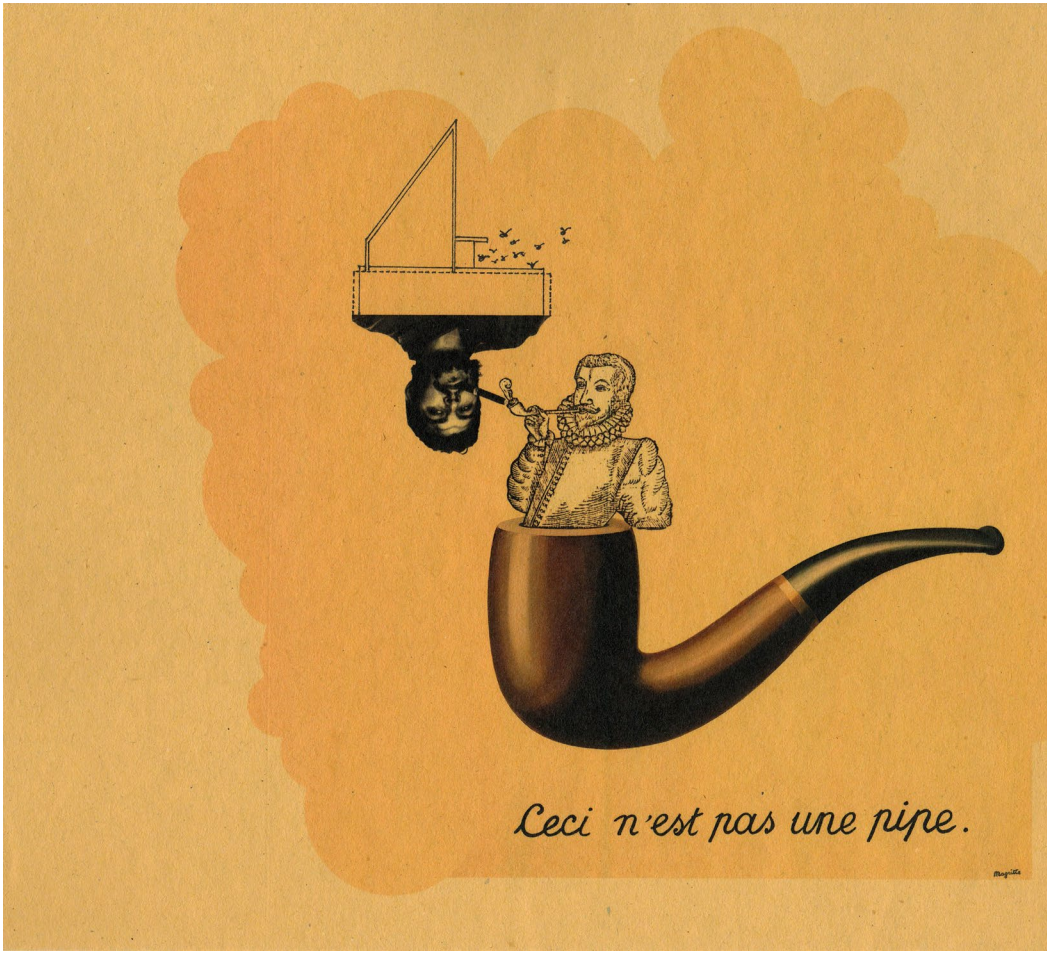
Second day of mourning: it is slightly before dusk, and my cousins and I decide to grab a cigarette and smoke it in the garden. This event was a transformative juncture because it weirdly marked the beginning of my adolescence—in short, my future sexual career. Adolescence is mainly visible through your body's dramatic transformations, but it is also the very subtle changes, like the gleam in your eye, the growth of a hair, the inflection in your voice, the smell of your body, and whether or not you've smoked a cigarette which begin to characterize you as not-a-child. What is specifically amazing about your first cigarette is its ability to arouse a part of your body which starts thinking about what I could do next. Except you actually don't do much afterwards, and that depravity is what encourages you to continue smoking.

Smoking, really, is sinning in many ways: it betrays parents, nations, the law. Somehow, arming yourself with a cigarette instills fear in those who had been—still are?—your figures of authority; the cigarette in your hand being their first failure as parents, governors. But it indicates that you too will never surpass your parents; that you too will follow in their footsteps as it had been laid by their own ancestors, or rapists, in the case of tobacco's imperial history.

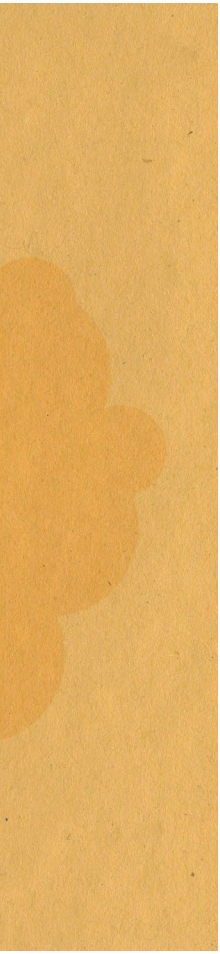
Anthropologists speculate that humans first started smoking tobacco leaves as a means of recovery from injury; a respite, if you will. The story goes as follows: our ancestors walk down through a forest they had just burnt down. One of them, a He—it is always he—trips and falls headfirst on a smouldering nicotine plant. He is later soothed by the burning

herb and adopts the habit of inhaling upon recovery. Most agro-historians and biologists now agree that smoking tobacco was developed through the ancient snuff cultures of South America; tobacco's geography of origin. South Americans used the crevices of the nose for more than just air, instead it was—still is?—used as a bodily passage for smoking, snuffing, and drinking.

A quick Google search on tobacco heritage will tell you that the plant was used in mythological rituals, tribal initiations, for conquest, pest control, as medical remedies, on virgins, for marriage, for death. Apparently the act of smoking during mourning is no unique custom to my family or their society. Instead it is a common form of funeral respiration across societies



of the non-Western hemisphere. Studies show that during occasions, such as funerals, marriages, and graduations, people smoke more. But its use in funerals also comes from a tobacco shaman tradition where the blowing of smoke is used to represent the dead spirit. It is inhaled and exhaled, with the cigarette smoke portraying the liminal space between life and death. Smoke is thus the distance and conversion between these two points: land and atmosphere. In my great-grandmother's case, the duration was three days. The puffs signified her shirking, dissipating, while we kept choking over her dead body; slowly coughing her out if you will.



Tobacco's globetrotting is part of the Empire's racialized violent history. Like gold, sugar, and silver, tobacco was one the Empire's greatest found resources. What distinguished tobacco from other exploitations and exports from the New World was how it augmented the lungs as a place not just for respiration but also stimulation vis-a-vis the act of smoking. But the main mystery of tobacco to the Europeans who had first encountered it was its addictive qualities. To the European continent, the idea of addiction was unknown. Under Catholicism, excessive indulgence in anything venal was termed as sin. Today, the chronicling of the addictive and destructive nature of consuming tobacco is extensive. Contemporary anti-smoking lobbies bear strong semblance to the hardening prohibitions against tobacco that were mobilized by the Catholic clergy, as more explorers returned from the New World with a fondness for smoking and snuffing. For the church, smoke had generally been associated with the devil who was sometimes represented as an atmospheric miasma emanating from human orifices. Thus, smoking tobacco in medieval Europe was mainly conducted in hiding.

This perception began to change when many Europeans who were travelling, exploiting, and fucking in the New World

began to contract syphilis. They noticed that tobacco was locally used as a medicine against the disease and thus the European Christians started doing the same. Accounts of tobacco's medicinal qualities had reached the frontiers of Europe, and the plant first began its life there in palace gardens, mainly as part of a beautification project. Some court alchemists began to experiment with the herb as a remedy and cure for certain types of diseases. These thoughts prevailed and people began to perceive tobacco as a preventive agent against disease, akin to how people today consume daily vitamins for stronger immunity. Slowly, smoke's function was relocated from dispersal (incense, fumigations, etc) to consumption. Eventually tobacco in the sixteenth century was marketed as a cure for a range of infections, such as dandruff, maggots, and wounds from poison arrows. The leaf, mainly cultivated in the palaces of Europe, became a major portrait of botany with exquisite culinary and medicinal qualities; a European poultice.

Yet, tobacco's most interesting contribution to the world, to capitalism, is how it developed a human geography of addiction and consequently globalized it. One of the main power dependency pipelines to the Empire was—still is—maintained through cigarette addiction. (Today's global tobacco industry is monopolized by the British American Tobacco, Imperial Tobacco, Reynolds America, and Philip Morris). Accounts of colonialists touring 'the world' and distributing cigarettes, usually for free, to guarantee that future populations would become addicted and then assign some of their purchasing power for cigarettes, are numerous. (In south-west China, people spend 11% of their wages on cigarettes; in Bangladesh, people spend 10 times more on cigarettes than on education; in Brazil it takes 22 minutes of labor to afford a Marlboro pack, and 52 minutes for a loaf of bread; 82% of the world's smokers are in developing nations or in-transition economies). Today, some scientists agree that the addictive machinations and infrastructure of the tobacco industry have also pollinated into the food industry, such as with sugar and caffeine products.

Within the world's agricultural and food history, tobacco has played an interesting role with our senses. For food and taste: tobacco had previously been used as a food item in times of war, crisis, and migration—when food quantities

were low, tobacco was smoked for endurance and appetite suppression. For smell: Luca Turin, a biophysicist and proponent of the olfaction vibration theory, has claimed that smokers have more precise smelling capabilities than non-smokers. Carbon monoxide emanating from cigarettes blocks the enzyme cytochrome P450, responsible for breaking down smells, resulting in olfactory molecules lingering for longer in the nose, thus improving smell. It would be interesting to speculate on how tobacco helped our ancestors in cooking and tasting, and more importantly, for protection from decay and poisonous things.

Lastly, if I were to use Turin's smell and tobacco theory, I will recall that like adolescence, the smell and consumption of the cigarette in the garden was brutal. Over time, my association with the smell of cigarettes oscillated between leather, bitter-almond, steel cucumber, cut grass, and salt, the smells which, to me, describe life's experiences. Today, writing this and smoking a cigarette, life can be boxed into something that is hot and peppery.

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Pradeep is Contributing Art Editor at *The Forager*. He explains his thought process for this work thus - *It is the unbearable aftermath of a surrealist painter's imagination, an image of an image which was left out to re-kindle minds as to the origin of what we understood as an image stands mutated today. Magritte may be laughing in his grave now. The first known image of a man smoking a tobacco pipe - from Anthony Chute's Tabaco, published in 1595 - emanates from within the pipe, while in an upside down world, Che Guevara lights his cigar. All of this emanates from a pipe which is not a pipe.*

Illustration by *Pradeep Kambathalli*. He is an artist living and working in Bengaluru, India.