

CEREAL CULTURES: EXPLORING PAST AND PRESENT SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SYSTEMS OF MILLET AND CEREAL CULTIVATION IN INDIA AND BEYOND



Interactive workshop
14-16 May 2025
University College London & Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Introduction

The highlands of Odisha are home to numerous (Indigenous) communities that have historically relied on millets and rice as staples. At least since the 1960's, the choice of crops cultivated by farmers in the region has been impacted by governmental agricultural policies and schemes, including the Green Revolution and the Public Distribution System. The general dominance of (modern varieties of) rice in the Indian diet since the Green Revolution has caused a worrying decline of local species and varieties of millets, which is attempted to be rectified via recent campaigns promoting millets. Since 2018, the interdisciplinary research network 'Cereal Cultures' has brought together archaeobotanists and social and cultural anthropologists, aiming to explore the relationship between local communities in Odisha and their staple cereals in the present changing circumstances.

Studies on the history of millet and rice cultivation in South Asia and neighbouring regions, have revealed shifts in their status as staples through time. In many cases, the shift toward rice as a staple has been attributed to the emergence of urbanism and a social elite, while millet cultivation is generally associated with small-scale farming and "less complex" communities. Even today, these perspectives find resonance in Indian society, whereby millets are often regarded as poor people's food, being associated with Indigenous groups and low-income populations, while rice is associated with a Hindu high status. In the highlands of Odisha, however, millets and rice have historically co-existed as staples, and they have become deeply embedded in the lifeworlds of local communities.

The balance between millets and rice as staple cereals thus seems to have emerged from a long interaction between several environmental cultural spheres, including livelihood practices, socio-economic developments, religious practices and ideas, identity formation and food security policies. Understanding the relationship between rice and millets is therefore relevant to the understanding of past societies and related agricultural practices, as well as to the emergence of present crop choices and agricultural systems.

As part of a collaboration between the University of Groningen (Groningen), Frobenius Institute (Frankfurt), the Institute of Archaeology at University College London, and the Royal Botanical Gardens Kew (London), we are interested in further exploring millet cultivation in relation to rice and other cereals in the upcoming workshop *Cereal cultures: exploring past and present social and economic systems of millet and cereal cultivation in India and beyond*. The workshop will be held from 14-16 May 2025 at University College London and The Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew. Our aims are (i) to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between millets and other cereals, as well as of the individual crops, in relation to cropping systems, processing and consumption practices, distribution systems, and social-ritual spheres in India, East Asia, South East Asia and Africa; (ii) to facilitate networking, interdisciplinary collaboration and discussion among researchers from the fields of anthropology, archaeology and (ethno)botany with a focus on millets and rice; (iii) and to reflect on current research trends related to millets and other cereals and identify topics for future research. The workshop will have an interactive format and we cordially invite you to participate and represent your research

Programme

Wednesday May 14th 2025

Venue: 36-38 Gordon Square, Room B03

<https://www.accessable.co.uk/venues/gordon-square-36-38>

12:00-13:00 Arrival & registration

Session 1. *Introducing cereal cultures* (Chair: Sonja Filatova)

13:00-14:00 Key lecture: *Introducing Cereal Cultures*.
The Cereal Cultures team

14:00-15:15 Introductions by participants

15:15-15:45 Coffee/tea

Session 2. *Exploring cereal cultures* (Chair: Peter Berger)

15:45-16:15 Key lecture: *Towards an archaeological definition of cereal culture areas in Iron Age and Early Historic India, ca. 3000-1500 years ago*.
Dorian Fuller

16:15-17:00 Q&A/Discussion

Evening programme (optional)

18:00-21:00 Gordon Childe Lecture: *Piecing Together Past Human Encounters with Death: a theory and practice of the archaeology of death*.
Liv Nilsson Stutz (Linnaeus University, Sweden)

Thursday May 15th 2025

Venue: 36-38 Gordon Square, Room B03

<https://www.accessable.co.uk/venues/gordon-square-36-38>

Session 3. *Changes and continuities in cereal cultures in the past and present* (Chair: Roland Hardenberg)

10:00-10:30 Key lecture: *Changes and continuities in cereal cultures, ethnoarchaeological perspectives from west and northeast Africa*.
Philippa Ryan.

10:30-12:00 Q&A/Discussion

12:00-13:00 Lunch*

Session 4. *Expressions of cereal cultures* (Chair: Dorian Fuller)

13:00-13:30 Key lecture: *Historical stratification of crop repertoires in Arunachal Pradesh*.
Roger Blench

13:30-15:00 Q&A/Discussion

15:00-15:30 Coffee/tea

Session 5. *Cereals as food* (Chair: Mark Nesbitt)

15:30-16:00 Key lecture: *Feeding Civilizations. The Role of Cereals as Food in South Asia's Past*.
Marco Madella

16:00-18:00 Q&A/Discussion

Evening programme (optional)

18:00 Reception with snacks at Institute of Archaeology (UCL)

Friday May 16th 2025

Venue: Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew (please consult attached map for further information)

Session 6. *(Ethno)botanical collections* (Chair: Philippa Ryan)

10:00-10:30 Key lecture: Title t.b.a.
Mark Nesbitt

10:30-11:00 Key lecture: *Rice-culture-environment nexus through the lens of herbarium specimens.*
Rafal Gutaker

11:00-11:30 Key lecture: *Unexplored Nutraceutical Properties of Folk Rice Varieties from South Asia.*
Debal Deb

11:30-12:00 Q&A/Discussion

12:00-13:00 Lunch*

13:00-15:00 Guided tour in Kew Economics Botany Collection and Herbarium

15:00-15:30 Coffee/tea

Session 7. *State of the art & trends for the future* (Chair: Sonja Filatova)

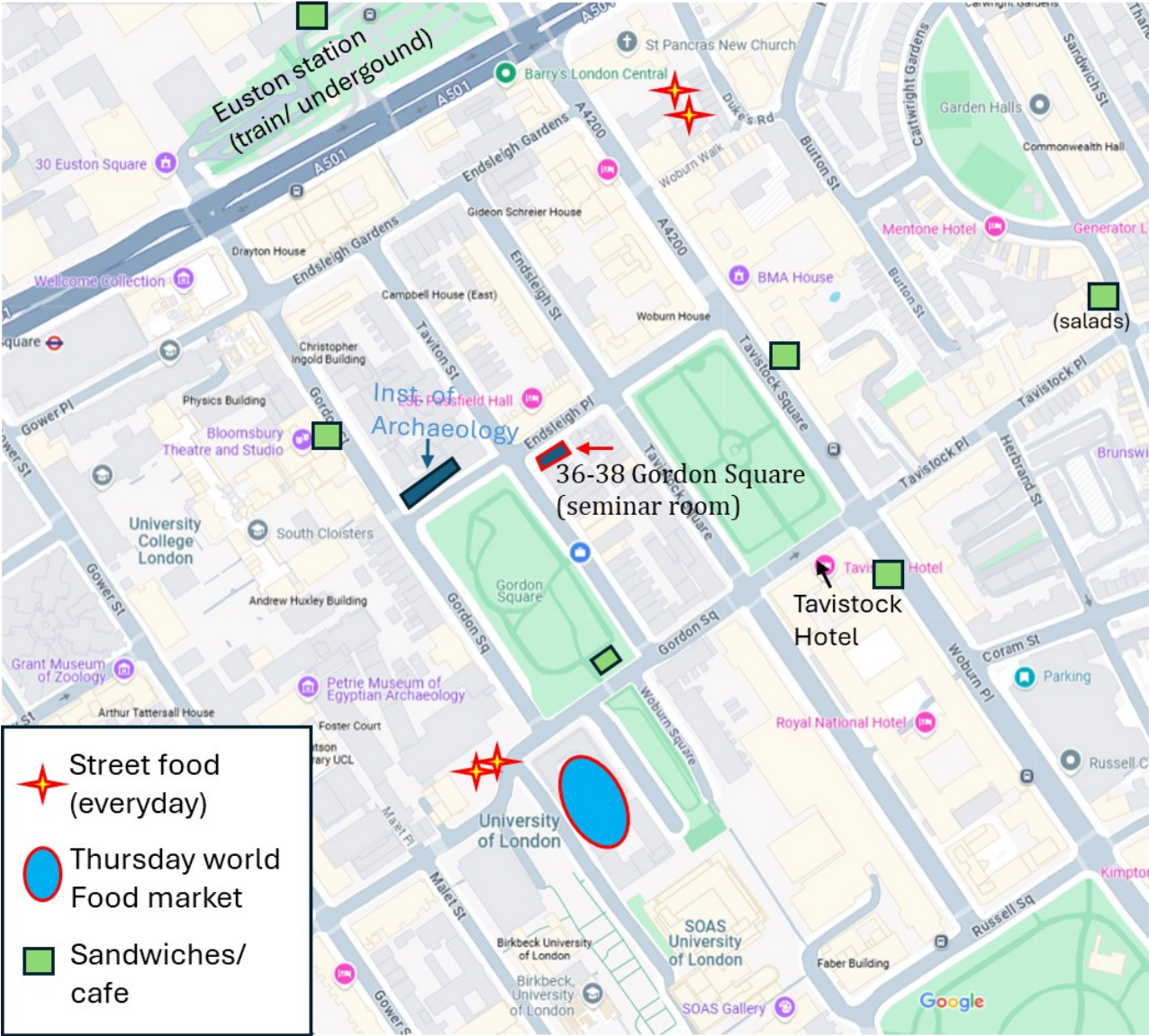
15:30-18:00 Panel discussion: Peter Berger, Roland Hardenberg, Dorian Fuller, Philippa Ryan, Mark Nesbitt

Evening: programme (optional)

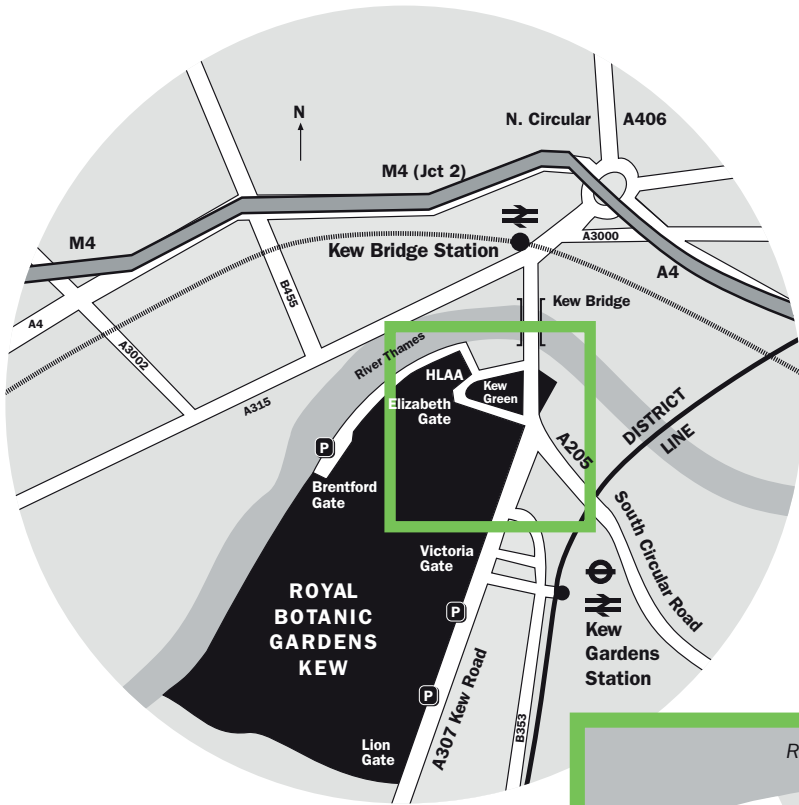
18:15 Dinner at the Coach & Horses (Address: 8 Kew Grn, London TW9 3BH)

* Please note that lunch is not included as part of the workshop. Coffee/tea, reception and the dinner will be provided by the workshop organisation.

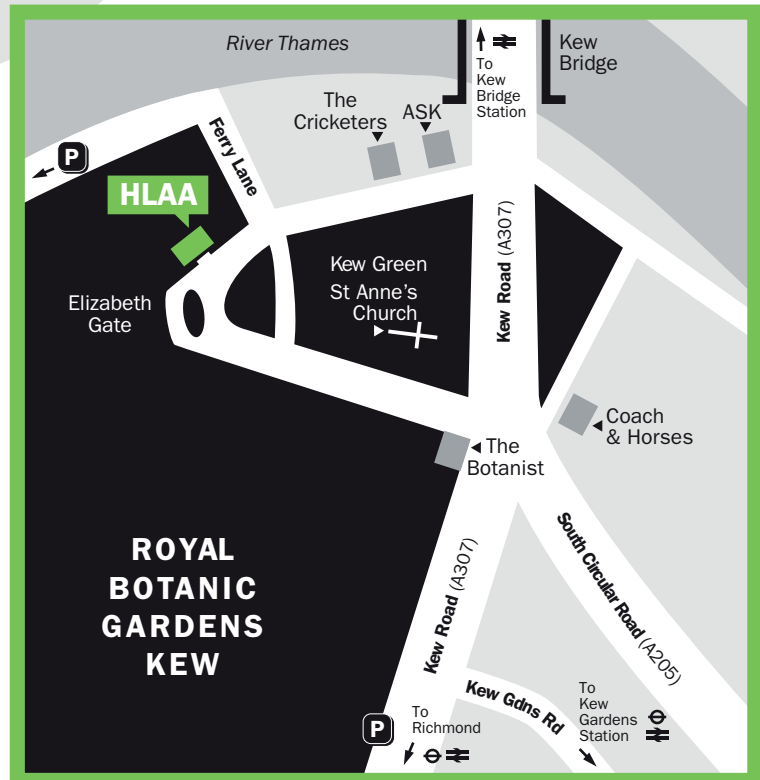
Map showing the workshop venue at University College London and some of the surrounding lunch opportunities



Royal Botanic Gardens Kew



How to get to
**Herbarium,
Library, Art
& Archives
(HLAA)**



Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew
Richmond Surrey, TW9 3AE

+44 (0)20 8332 5000 www.kew.org

List of organisers

- Dr. Peter Berger (University of Groningen)
- Dr. Sonja Filatova (University of Groningen)
- Prof. Roland Hardenberg (Frobenius Institute)
- Prof. Dorian Fuller (University College London)
- Dr. Philippa Ryan (Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew)
- Prof. Mark Nesbitt (Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew)

List of participants

- Dr. Francesca D'Agostini (Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew)
- Dr. Roger Blench (Directorate of Indigenous Affairs, Government of Arunachal Pradesh; McDonald Institute of Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge; Department of History, University of Jos; and Kay Williamson Educational Foundation)
- Dr. Cristina Castillo (University College London)
- Carmen Chulvi (University of Valencia)
- Dr. Debal Deb (Vrihi Beej Binimoy Kendra)
- Dr. Susanne Fehlings (Frobenius Institute)
- Dr. Rafal Gutaker (Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew)
- Anna den Hollander (University College London)
- Yuchun Kan (University College London)
- Indhubala Kesavan (Frobenius Institute)
- Ashutosh Kumar (University of Groningen)
- Suneet Kumar (Frobenius Institute)
- Emil Kunna (University College London)
- Prof. Marco Madella (Pompeu Fabra University)
- Antonio Perailta Gomez (Institute of History, Madrid)
- Samhitha Prasannakumara (University College London)
- Jayme Reichart (University College London)
- Dr. Chris Stevens (University College London)
- Nidhi Trivedi (University of Groningen)
- Togzhan Utetileiova (Frobenius Institute)
- Anna-Laure White (University College London)
- Yawei Yu (University College London)