

*The IU Department of Anthropology presents:*

# "Teawords: Experiments with Quality in Indian Tea Production"



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***Abstract:***

The identification of distinguishing characteristics of commodities—a process known as “qualification”—frequently involves the use of specialized lexicons. Before Indian teas are auctioned, brokers evaluate them using a glossary of some 150 English words. This glossary was devised at the end of the British colonial period by industrial chemists who aimed to subject the aesthetic judgments of brokers to experimental scrutiny. “Teawords” formed part of a late colonial effort to ensure the circulation of “quality” tea from plantation to market. After India’s independence, Indian brokers and plantation managers continued this effort. Like other vocabularies for describing comestible commodities, teawords performatively reproduce gendered and classed distinctions, but they do much more. When they circulate among brokers and managers, teawords subject plantation conditions to experimental adjustment. As a form of linguistic and material experimentation, qualification extends colonial norms of valuation—and the institution of the plantation itself—into contemporary capitalist circuits.

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