

## Cocoanut (*Theobroma nucifera*) ?

*Sir:* The elegant coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*) constitutes a familiar sight to everyone—if only from postcard pictures. Less generally known is the cacao tree (*Theobroma cacao*, fam. Sterculiaceae) with its pear-shaped fruits hanging directly from the trunk and larger branches. In spite of their dissimilar appearance, the two plants have much in common. Growing in tropical regions, both have provided local populations with life-giving food and drink since time immemorial. Moreover, their products (copra, from which coconut oil is obtained, and cacao beans, which constitute the raw material for the manufacture of chocolate, cacao butter, and various cacao-based foods and drinks) have become important articles of commerce.

It is easy to understand how, in centuries past, the similar-sounding names of these two plants, growing in far-away lands, should have become confused. The “cacauatl” seeds of the Aztecs, which Columbus took back to Spain, became the Spanish “cacao,” and when the seeds, and the tasty drink prepared from them, later spread to England, a further phonetic shift occurred, and “cacao” became “cocoa.” From then on, confusion with “coco,” that other exotic tree, became unavoidable, and cocoa soon came to denote the products of both *Theobroma cacao* and *Cocos nucifera*.

Samuel Johnson is said to have misspelled the word “coco” in his Dictionary of the English Language, published in 1755. While it is true that Johnson ran the article on the coconut palm together with that on the cacao tree, using the spelling “cocoa” for both, the literary evidence (quoted by him) seems to indicate that he was only recording established usage. (A few lines by the Scottish poet James Thomson, who lived during the first half of the 18th century: “Amid’ those orchards of the fun/give me to drain the cocoa’s milky bowl,/and from the palm

to draw its freshening wine.”) However, by giving official sanction to the spelling “cocoa” for “coco,” Dr. Johnson has compounded the confusion between the two.

In modern usage, “cocoa” is used always for the products of *Theobroma cacao*, but unfortunately, in spite of warnings, this spelling is still found occasionally in texts and on labels to denote products of the coconut (*Cocos nucifera*). A brand of decolorizing carbon carrying the label of a reputable company is marketed, and listed in the catalog, under the name of “cocoanut charcoal.” Authoritative dictionaries, among them Webster’s Third and The Concise Oxford Dictionary, list “cocoa” as an alternative spelling for “coco.” There is no need to emphasize the difficulties that could arise from such indiscriminate spelling. Terms such as “cocoa fat” would be ambiguous. One shudders at the thought of the little “a” playing havoc with the indexing and abstracting of rapidly multiplying technical articles.

If dictionaries impartially record word usage, should it not be the duty of those engaged in the trade, processing and study of cacao and coconut products to create “correct,” i.e., unambiguous usage? Many years ago, the spelling “coconut” was adopted by the Society of Public Analysts and other authorities in Great Britain, in order to avoid the above difficulties [Analyst 39, 30 (1914)]. Let us adhere to this practice, let us restrict the use of the term “cocoa” to the products of *Theobroma cacao*, and let us do away, once and for all, with the hybrid “cocoanut.”

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