

**Rupununi re-collections:  
historical photographs, Indigenous knowledge and heritage in Guyana**

**PhD Studentship within the AHRC Science Museums & Archives Consortium**

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## **1. Focus and significance**

There is widespread recognition amongst academics and policy-makers that Indigenous knowledge can play an important role in biodiversity conservation, poverty alleviation and climate change mitigation. Although Indigenous knowledge is undoubtedly dynamic and responsive to change, historical processes of colonisation, resource extraction and state intervention, and rapidly changing socio-environmental conditions, have led to significant disruption in Indigenous livelihoods and cultures. In this context, the mobilisation of heritage collections, including images of traditional material culture and practices, has the potential to enrich Indigenous heritage, strengthening Indigenous identity and developing new contexts for knowledge transmission.

This project builds on both long-established critical histories of colonial photo collections and more recent research on Indigenous heritage in archive collections in Europe and North America. Within visual and museum anthropology, there is now a substantial literature on the uses of historical photo collections in collaborative field research with Indigenous communities. While benefitting from the experience of community engagement in other collections-based SMAC projects (notably at Kew), this project's focus on Indigenous groups overseas represents a significant step-change for the RGS-IBG. More generally, the project will contribute significantly to the development of collections-based approaches to field studies of Indigenous heritage.

The studentship also has the potential to contribute significantly to an important new policy initiative within Guyana offering opportunities for professional development and impact. Prof Mistry currently leads a project funded by the Darwin Initiative (DEFRA) working with Indigenous communities and the government to develop a national action plan for traditional knowledge. This will explicitly address the question of Indigenous heritage, linking government departments working on Indigenous well-being, environmental protection, culture, education and health.

## **2. Institutional and collections contexts**

The archival phase of the project focusses principally on RGS-IBG collections, though it will also involve work at Kew and other SMAC archives (as described below). The RGS-IBG collection reflects more than a century of ethnographic and geographical fieldwork in Guyana. It includes historically important photographic archives, such as those of the colonial anthropologist Everard Im Thurn (1870s-90s); materials produced within a series of

mid twentieth-century geographical expeditions and land surveys (1930s-1970s); and recent donations, notably the Michael Eden Collection, including hundreds of slides, prints and negatives relating to ecological research in the Rupununi (1960s-1990s). The historical depth and variety of these materials makes the RGS collection particularly important from a heritage perspective.

The project is timely given wider developments in relation to the RGS-IBG photographic collection, notably the current digitisation programme in collaboration with Wiley (due for completion in May 2020). The project will help to strengthen the research base of this programme, enhancing understanding of the significance and potential uses of such materials from an Indigenous perspective. The project will also enable connections with related SMAC collections. These include archival photographs and economic botany artefacts from Guyana at Kew (the subject of doctoral research by Albuquerque 2013); photographs, ethnographic materials and *materia medica* at the Science Museum and a further album in the Ricketts Collection at Bradford; and a rare run of the Georgetown natural history periodical *Timehri* held at the Royal Society.

### **3. Academic contexts**

The project brings together research in two different academic fields: firstly, a strongly policy-influenced literature on social memory and traditional knowledge in the context of contemporary development and environmental challenges (as in the UN Convention on Biological Diversity); and secondly, an historical and anthropological literature on collections-based historical research within visual and museum studies. Working across these two fields, the project draws on a shared concern with the mobilisation of cultural heritage, linking Indigenous ontologies, decolonising methodologies and action research in an integrated programme of fieldwork and collections-based research.

In the literature on sustainable development, ‘social memory’ refers to a shared representation of the past that shapes a group’s identity and understanding of the world (McIntosh 2000, Misztal 2003). This can be transferred, reinforced and re-worked in various ways (Mistry et al. 2014a): habits or rituals (e.g. learning through doing, imitation of practice); oral communication (e.g. storytelling, teaching); ‘institutions of knowledge’ (e.g. rules-in-use, values, metaphors); or physical/spiritual forms and artefacts (e.g. places, objects, tools). It is with the latter, namely artefacts in the form of photographic materials, that this project is concerned. Rapidly changing social, environmental and political conditions have affected Indigenous modes of communication and social memory-making (Jafferally 2016).

The literature on archive photo collections, as developed in museum anthropology and cultural geography (Rose 2016; Edwards 2001; Ryan 1994) provides a core resource for the project. For example, elicitation-based field research methods have become standard tools in collaborative research on photo archives with Indigenous groups in various parts of the world (e.g. Binney and Chaplin 1991, Brown and Peers 2005). This has generated a further body of work on photography, materiality and memory (e.g. Bell 2010, Lydon 2010, Basu 2019). The project will engage with wider conceptual, methodological and ethical aspects of research on the uses of the photographic archive.

Although the project reflects the diverse concerns of various disciplines, there is common ground in our shared concern with heritage as an active resource in community development and in our commitment to the recovery and support of Indigenous agency. The project also chimes with the broadly decolonising agenda currently emerging within both UK academia and the heritage sector. Finally, as well as engaging with these broader themes, the project builds on research on Indigenous culture and heritage in Guyana itself, including collections-based historical research connecting Kew archives with field research (Albuquerque 2013, 2016) and contemporary ecological and policy-related research (Mistry et al. 2014b).

#### **4. Research questions**

- How are Indigenous practices and worldviews documented, represented or misrepresented in historical photo collections?
- In what ways and to what extent can enhanced engagement with historical photograph collections contribute to the maintenance and recovery of Indigenous heritage?
- How can improved understanding of Indigenous perspectives contribute to the enhancement of collections resources, including catalogues and online resources?

#### **5. Methodology**

The project combines (a) archival research in UK collections with (b) field-based photo-elicitation in the Rupununi. A participatory action research framework will allow research questions to be refined and addressed with participants in an iterative way to produce tangible benefits. The student will be encouraged to use participatory video as a way of creating new interpretative narratives. The possibility of a small-scale exhibition will also be considered in order to engage with wider audiences in Guyana.

The project is informed by methodological and ethical protocols governing research on Indigenous heritage within both participatory development and museum anthropology, as developed for example at the Pitt Rivers Museum (Brown, Peers et al 2005), the Weltmuseum Vienna (Augustat and Kapfhammer 2017) and the Kew economic botany collection (Fonseca-Kruel 2018). The field research will be planned on a participatory development model. This requires Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) to be obtained from Indigenous communities through their associations, as well as from individuals. The research will be undertaken in collaboration with three Rupununi Indigenous associations: the North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB), the South Central Peoples Development Association (SCPDA) and the Kanuku Mountains Community Representative Group (KMCRG). This project has already been discussed with representatives of these organisations, and they have shown keen interest to participate.

Concerning the archival research: the corpus of Guyana-related material at the RGS-IBG is relatively well-defined. Related projects (e.g. Driver and Jones 2009) have established the potential heritage value of materials within the collection. The project will also require archival and library research at Kew (where Guyana economic botany materials also enable an engagement with objects) and at the Royal Society (which has a run of the periodical *Timehri*, a significant though largely untapped resource for the study of Indigenous heritage).

Concerning photo-elicitation fieldwork with the Rupununi: this will be managed through focus groups and interviews. The aim will be to analyse how informants respond to archival photos and to explore their relevance to Indigenous culture and identity today, bearing in mind that, as Augustat and Kapfhammer (2017) suggest, this may be about active forgetting as well as remembering. In consultation with the associations, focus groups will be organised in central meeting places/villages, enabling diverse community participation, including both elders and youth, and both men and women. Subsequent in-depth, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with selected individuals.

The student will be encouraged to make use of participatory video (PV). Working with well-established methods through an existing group of Rupununi PV Indigenous researchers (set up through Prof Mistry's research), PV will enable understanding of how participants experience the process of engaging with archival photos, and what narratives they want to promote. Project research will provide material for a small exhibition, including responses from the photo-elicitation and PV. This exhibit will be portable so that it can be taken to key meeting places/villages, and shown during Amerindian Heritage Month at Castellani House in Georgetown. Exhibiting at these locations will allow further engagement with Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences.

## **6. Training and development**

The project is designed to provide a Masters-level candidate with training in and experience of innovative collections-based research in a cross-cultural context. A programme of generic and project-specific research training will be provided in the first year of the project.

The scope of the project, defined by a specific region (Rupununi) in a country where English is the national language, and by a heritage collection containing clearly-specified archival materials, is well suited to PhD research. Expert guidance on all aspects of the PhD will be provided by the primary and secondary supervisors at Royal Holloway, RGS-IBG and at Kew. Additional support in Guyana will be enabled by Dr Jafferally and Prof Mistry's well-established role in community development projects.

The project will also enable the student to develop key skills with significantly enhanced employability in the heritage, museum and academic sectors. There are clear and exciting options for skills development and potential placement experience supported by additional funding from AHRC. Given the nature of the project, which combines collection-based work in the UK and fieldwork in Guyana, there are significant opportunities in both locations and the student can benefit from both. Through strong existing contacts, clear professional development possibilities have been identified, with the supervisory team well-placed to

support the student in their choice. These include placement opportunities in heritage institutions in Georgetown, Guyana, and in London, including at the RGS-IBG. In combination, these development opportunities will enable the student to acquire valuable skills which are directly relevant to later employability within the heritage, development or university sectors. The final package and timetable will be discussed and agreed with the appointed student.

## 7. Key bibliography

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