

“AMONG THE INDIANS OF GUIANA”: OBJECTS, EXCHANGES AND ENTANGLED STORIES IN EVERARD IM THURN’S TIME (1852-1932)

“ENTRE OS ÍNDIOS DA GUIANA”: OBJECTOS, TROCAS E HISTÓRIAS ENTRELAÇADAS NO TEMPO DE EVERARD IM THURN (1852-1932)

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RESUMO

Este artigo foca-se em objetos específicos, colocando-os num contexto histórico e contemporâneo, utilizando como fontes de pesquisa arquivos e a investigação realizada numa expedição à Guiana (2010). As práticas de Everard im Thurn (explorador, botânico e fotógrafo) irão também ser discutidas, de modo, a que se possa revelar as ‘histórias inter-culturais’. Serão expostos alguns exemplos em que é possível ver as histórias por detrás dos objetos, mostrando como os europeus absorveram elementos do conhecimento indígena, bem como como os ameríndios absorveram elementos europeus. Através dos objetos, o presente artigo tem como objetivo compreender o interesse de Everard im Thurn em certos itens e perceber como estes foram obtidos.

PALAVRAS CHAVE:

Ameríndios, Everard im Thurn, Guiana, Jardins Botânicos de Kew, cultura material.

ABSTRACT

This paper turns to specific objects, setting them in historical and contemporary context, using both archival sources and information gathered at a trip to Guyana (2010), discussing aspects of Everard im Thurn’s (explorer, botanist, and photographer) collecting practices, and seeking to restore the ‘cross-cultural histories’. I will expose some examples in which it is possible to see the histories beneath the objects. Here, particular cases will show how Europeans absorbed elements of Indigenous knowledge as well as how Amerindians absorbed European elements. Through the objects, this paper aims to understand Everard im Thurn’s interest in certain items and comprehend why and how they were obtained.

KEYWORDS:

Amerindian, Everard im Thurn, Guyana, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, material culture.

Background and Context

This paper is the result of part of a project² which explored the collected materials associated with Everard im Thurn (1852-1932) gathered during the late nineteenth century in British Guiana (today Guyana)³, especially held by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (RBG, Kew) and the British Museum (BM) and using meticulous archival research and specific objects in the collection as a way into finding the histories and stories which contributed to the making of the collection.

In the literature it is noted the role of RBG, Kew, as an important part in the making of the British empire, in terms of ‘scientific research and the development of economically useful plants for production on the plantations of the colonial possessions’ in which raw materials were extracted to be industrialised afterwards (Brockway, 2002). However, this present work shows another aspect of this trade, that is, the historical reconstruction through the study of raw materials and collected objects, by following their trajectories through time and space. As Susan Pearce notes in her book *Interpreting Objects and Collections*: ‘all collected objects begin life outside a collection, and it is possible to build up individual biographies for particular objects which cover first their lives in general circulation, then their entry into a collection, and then perhaps the entry of that collection into an established museum’ (Pearce, 1994). It is this life outside a collection, the object’s itinerary, that is also explored along this paper.

Considering that there is so much to be explored at Kew’s collections, so many stories to be uncovered through the correspondence and the objects collected, it is urgent to recover or at least have some glimpses of the histories behind these collections. While in Jim Endersby’s book *Imperial Nature*, the practices of collecting and classifying in Victorian botany are explored, as well as the role of Kew and its director’s, this paper suggests that the study of the collections themselves can add even more to this body of research (Endersby, 2008). Through historical reconstruction, it is possible to trace objects as they move through time and space and acquire different meanings. In addition, this paper shows how the collections represent cross-cultural encounters and how the collections shine light on the colonial relationships between Britain and its colonies at the time.

In order to do this, this paper focuses in the collections gathered by Sir Everard im Thurn while he was in British Guiana during the late nineteenth century. One of the reasons his collections from British Guiana were chosen, was because this colony was a somewhat neglected area of the British empire that was worth to be studied. In addition, there was a lot of potential and diversity in terms of the materials collected by im Thurn (herbarium specimens, raw materials, objects, publications, correspondence, illustrations and photographs) which are spread not only at Kew but also in other institutions, such as the British Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford), Royal Geographical Society and others. Everard im Thurn, was a museum curator, botanist, mountaineer, explorer, anthropologist, ornithologist, photographer and administrator. One of the

2 Funded by FCT, Portugal (ref. SFRH/BD/45965/2008) and Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK (AHRC).

3 Guyana is a proud and independent nation since 1966 with a rich culture, one that I had the pleasure to know in first hand. Throughout this paper and so as to maintain an identity with the time of the events, the country will often be referred to by its former colonial name: ‘British Guiana’.

reasons for studying im Thurn was to gain glimpses of the scientific culture of British Empire in that period by reconstructing this Victorian character through his Guianese collections.

British Guiana

Before becoming a British colony, British Guiana was occupied by various European nations, including Spain and France, which struggled to possess it (im Thurn, 1883b). However, the Dutch and the English were the 'chief colonising nations' (im Thurn, 1883b). As im Thurn himself explained, 'From the date of the formation of the first successful settlement, in 1580, for more than eighty years, till 1663, France, Holland and England were competing with more or less success against each other for the possession of Guiana' (im Thurn, 1883b). Guiana remained in the hands of the Dutch between 1667 and 1796, and they had a practical presence in organising the colony (im Thurn, 1883c). As a matter of fact, at that time, the colonised area, here called Guiana, consisted of three colonies named Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo (im Thurn, 1883c). In 1796 the Dutch colonies were occupied by the English, but it was only in 1803 that they came under English rule (im Thurn, 1884). Almost thirty years later, in 1831, the three colonies were united into the single political entity British Guiana.⁴ In 1835 the German explorer Robert Schomburgk mapped British Guiana and its boundaries, on the service for the British authorities, and in 1840 the map of the British colony was published (Dalton, 1855). However, after its publication, Venezuela protested and negotiations between both countries over the boundary began (Dalton, 1855). The discovery of gold in the disputed area in the late 1850s did not help this fragile situation (Dalton, 1855). Regarding the boundary dispute, it is important to stress that Everard im Thurn was involved with the Boundary Commission from 1897 to 1899 (Anonymous, 1967: 690).

Historical Sources

In relation to the object collections, the first approach was indirect, through correspondence and reports, and by consulting databases such as Kew Economic Botany Collection Database (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 2009) and British Museum Object Catalogue Database (British Museum, 2009). After making the selection of objects the 'object biography' methodology was used (Kopytoff, 1986). Here, special attention was given not only to the object itself but also to the packaging, labels, accession registers, catalogues, correspondence and publications in order to understand the object trajectory. Through the study of im Thurn's correspondence at Kew, which mentioned many of the objects that are now held in different institutional collections, the notes he made along with the objects and his published works, such as *Among the Indians of Guiana* (im Thurn 1883a) and several reports in *Timehri* (im Thurn, 1882; im Thurn, 1883d; im Thurn, 1884b; im Thurn, 1885; im Thurn, 1886), it was possible to gain a deeper understanding of the objects im Thurn collected while he was in British Guiana. By cross-referencing these materials the author was able to obtain useful information not only about the objects themselves, but also about

⁴ The colony became independent in 1966 as Guyana (Luscombe, 2016).

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the plant species and cross-cultural encounters.

However, the data available for each object was uneven. For this reason, although the method was the same, the sources that provided information about the objects varied. Furthermore, the process of choosing, researching and writing about specific objects had often been problematic because the documentation associated with the items is generally poor or virtually non-existent.

During the study of the objects it was very important the visualisation of these objects within their ‘habitat’ – i.e. within an Amerindian context – and to obtain a Guyanese perspective, a fieldtrip to Guyana in October 2010 was undertaken. To understand the immediate context in which these objects were produced and used, the first step was to contextualise them through an Amerindian perspective. Gathering traces of an Indigenous voice through the archives in which the Imperial and Victorian point of view prevails is a daunting challenge. To face this challenge the information was cross-referenced with correspondence, notes, papers, books, reports and objects mentioned previously, with Amerindian testimonies from contemporary Makushi and Arawak communities. An Amerindian perspective thus emerged, combining archival and fieldwork.

In this fieldtrip, data collection such as direct observations as well as interviews with focal groups were conducted in some of the Makushi and Arawak communities, adding a Guyanese perspective to this body of research. During the fieldtrip to Guyana, I managed to interview people mostly from the Makushi and Arawak communities, belonging to the following villages: Fair View (mixed community: Arawak, Makushi, Patamona and Wapishana), Surama (Makushi community), Annai (Makushi community) and Kabakaburi (Arawak community). However it is important to stress that this fieldtrip aimed at contextualising the Amerindian objects and offering me a sense of place, of where the objects originated. The conducted interviews were not part of an in-depth anthropological study per se.

“Among the Indians of Guiana”

Following Nicholas Thomas’ words regarding Indigenous artefacts in museums – ‘we must ask why these objects were acquired and what their collectors thought they were doing’ – the question is whether im Thurn looked at these objects merely as ‘curiosities’ or if he was already looking at them from an anthropological point of view (Thomas, 1991).

In one of im Thurn’s journeys to the interior of British Guiana, a particular episode portrays the cultural encounters and illustrates how randomly im Thurn behaved when collecting. In this episode, im Thurn describes how, after arriving to the settlement, crowds of Makushi people joined the camp with their families and domestic animals (im Thurn, 1883: 30). It was evident that they were spending the night there because they were bringing their hammocks as well. Im Thurn describes that “more Indians continued to arrive” and “each newcomer insisted upon shaking hands, a practice which they were told by our men was customary among white men” (im Thurn, 1883: 30). This was the exciting scene that Everard came across, where he observed the men, women and children around him. In one of his descriptions he mentions that many of them were “loaded with necklaces of the teeth of various animals and with beads, tassels of bird’s skins, and wore brilliant feather crowns” (im Thurn, 1883: 30). He also ex-

plains how he negotiated and what he did in exchange for particular necklaces in which he was interested:

Babies and children were all perfectly naked but for a necklace, which each wore, and a piece of twine tied round the body above the hips. Taking a fancy to one or two of these necklaces, I began to bargain with the mothers for them. One, made of deer's teeth, was really very pretty, and another consisted of three magnificent jaguar teeth. The mothers, stripping their children of these, their only garments, gave them in exchange for red beads; the poor children screamed and bawled till, ashamed of my barbarity, I made peace by giving them some beads for themselves (im Thurn, 1883: 30)

This episode portrays im Thurn's relationship with the Amerindian people and describes his understanding of how he managed to obtain particular objects he was interested in; the babies' necklaces in this case, and giving beads as an exchange. In another example im Thurn also explains how he had to socialise with the Amerindians so that he could "have permission" to see their houses and ask all the questions about the objects he was interested in, as the following quote illuminates:

The houses of the Indians were always interesting, and the Indians themselves, after a time, and when their reserve had somewhat decreased, were sufficiently communicative, and sometimes even too hospitable. Etiquette demands the offer [paiwari liquor], and etiquette demands that the visitor should finish the horrid draught to the last dregs. Intent on establishing friendly relations with the people, I often found myself obliged to undergo this disagreeable ordeal; for, after it, I was allowed to walk about the house, handle all things, and ask any number of questions (im Thurn, 1883: 34-35).

These two cases demonstrate how Everard obtained particular objects by negotiating with the local people and how he forced himself to socialise, in the last case to drink paiwari, to get the Amerindians' trust in return for answers and to be "allowed to walk about the house [and] handle all things", as he mentions.

Concerning im Thurn's interest in particular objects, he also mentions the *queyu*, an apron used by Amerindian women (im Thurn, 1883: 195)⁵ (Figure 1). He recognises how the *queyu* was being transformed over the years due to cultural encounters between the locals and the Europeans (im Thurn, 1883: 195). He adds that the majority of these aprons were made of 'European beads fastened together into a cloth-like fabric' (im Thurn, 1883: 195). Although rare, it was still possible to find original *queyus* that the Warrau women made from bark as well as aprons the Pianoghotto women made from small bright-coloured seeds instead of beads (im Thurn, 1883: 195). Im Thurn concludes by saying that "all these [*queyus*] are probably survivals of old indigenous customs" (im Thurn, 1883: 195). The beads were disseminated throughout the colony and were used "to replace the seeds or teeth, which were formerly all that the In-

5 The *queyu* is also mentioned in *An Introductory Study of the Arts, Crafts, and Customs of the Guiana Indians* (Roth, 1924: 446).

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dian had of this sort to make into body ornaments” (im Thurn, 1883: 201). As im Thurn was giving beads as an exchange for particular objects he was interested in, to study and preserve them, he was also contributing to the transformation of these objects. Consequently, the European beads were used instead of the seeds to produce the objects.

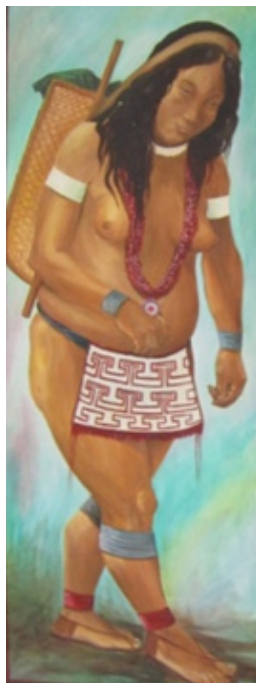


Figure 1. A contemporary representation of a Makushi/Makusi woman wearing a queyu (panel at the Walter Roth Museum, Georgetown, Guyana, © Sara Albuquerqueauthor’s photograph).

It is important to stress that the Makushi people in Guyana still produce queyus nowadays for themselves, but they only dress in their traditional costumes on special occasions and for celebrations. In Surama, it is still possible to find cotton queyus made of seeds instead of beads (Figure 2). Each costume has a different meaning, which is linked to a particular dance and song. It is through music and dance that Amerindian knowledge is still passed to younger generations⁶.



Figure 2. Jean Allcock showing different traditional costumes used during Amerindian celebrations (Surama, Guyana, October 2010, © Sara Albuquerqueauthor’s photograph).

⁶ The songs and dances can be linked with cotton spinning or with the production of cassava for instance; Jean Allcock personal communication, Surama October 2010.

In Everard im Thurn's publication *Among the Indians in Guiana* (1883), it is possible to identify different cases of im Thurn's interaction with the Amerindians, as the previous examples demonstrate. The aforementioned cases give insights into how he obtained access to the information not only related to certain objects but also in the context of some Amerindian beliefs and their lives.

At first it seems that there is a contradiction in im Thurn's discourse, which it is possible to recognise through his publications and correspondence. However, it is important to bear in mind that in im Thurn's discourse he is addressing a particular audience – a Victorian audience. On the one hand, he shows respect and admiration towards the Amerindians by referring to their capacities; on the other hand, his discourse suggests a latent superiority because of the way he was educated, in the models of the Western education, as well as the way “the Other” was seen in the Victorian society. In the first case im Thurn demonstrates his admiration towards the local people by revealing he was struck “by the way in which the Indians managed to follow the path, which, even when there is no water, is hardly discernible to an unpractised eye, and which now was completely hidden under a sheet of water; yet we emerged from the flood exactly where the track led out” (im Thurn, 1883: 49). This reiterates Burnett's remark in “It is Impossible to Make a Step without the Indians” when he illuminates how local people were essential for a successful expedition (Burnett, 2002). In another example im Thurn remarks that he met “the most highly civilised Macusi” who spoke fluent Macusi and Portuguese who, despite having “his teeth filed and painted after the Indian manner, seemed not entirely to have rejected barbarism” (im Thurn, 1883: 45). Therefore, although Everard recognised the Amerindians' skills, in many cases he remarks that they had signs of “barbarism”, which reflects im Thurn's attitude of superiority. In one episode im Thurn remarks that “the Indian, man or woman, whatever the tribe, is not a fine animal in appearance” (im Thurn, 1883: 188). Im Thurn's ambiguity towards the Amerindians indicates an inner conflict. He had to struggle between the way he was educated, in which it was expected to see the colonies through the superior eyes of the empire and, at the same time, his perspective was gradually changing because of his experiences throughout the years spent among the Amerindians in British Guiana. It is also important to bear in mind that the cross-cultural encounters im Thurn described in the 1890s were “rare privileges for a European” (Dalziell, 2002). In im Thurn's paper, “A Tramp with Redskins”, he portrays ‘a harmonious relationship between the colonised Amerindians and himself as their colonial leader’ which should be analysed carefully and take into consideration that he was addressing to a Victorian audience (Dalziell, 2002). This “harmonious relationship” as described by im Thurn could be simply the obedience towards the colonial leader. However, in im Thurn's correspondence there are also clear signs of affection towards the Amerindians, which is understandable, considering that he lived there for almost twenty years.

Arrows Made of Rappoo “Said to Be Poisonous”

Im Thurn sent several different kinds of arrows to Britain and to the British Museum (BM) in particular. The arrows he sent from British Guiana have various shapes depending on their purpose: hunting birds, fish, turtles or game (British Museum, 2009). Most of these arrows were fletched using the feathers

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of the powis bird.⁷ The game-arrows used by the savannah tribes, had “very long lance shaped heads made of a bamboo that the Indians called rappoo” (im Thurn, 1883: 242, my italics). This bamboo “only grows in a few places”. To use it, the Amerindians cut and dried it carefully before the arrow head was shaped and hardened in the fire (im Thurn, 1883: 242)⁸. After this process, the arrow head was fixed with karamanni wax into the reed shaft and was then ready to use (im Thurn, 1883: 242). Im Thurn sent two of these arrows to the RBG, Kew (Figure 3). Later on, one of these was sent to the BM in 1960⁹. In im Thurn's notes regarding the objects, he says that these arrows, made of bamboo (*Guadua* sp.), which were known as rappoo arrows, were used to hunt bush-hogs (peccaries)¹⁰. In other notes he adds that these arrows were used “chiefly by the Macusi Indians”¹¹.



Figure 3. Arrow head from British Guiana collected by im Thurn (EBC31983, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew). (© Copyright The Board of Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew).

In *Among the Indians of Guiana* im Thurn mentions an episode in which he refers to these rappoo arrows, as the following extract attests:

On the next day we reached the cataracts of Akramukra, and, on the day following, those at Rappoo. These latter take their name from a kind of bamboo which grows on the islands among them, and which is much used by the savannah Indians for making arrow-heads, which are, we were told, as poisonous as those tipped with ourali. I afterwards tried one of these rappoo arrows; but the fowl [chicken] which was shot showed no symptoms of poison; and an Indian who was standing by ingenuously remarked that a rappoo arrow is only poisonous when it enters far enough into the body (im Thurn, 1883: 25).

The name given to these rappoo arrows had to do not only with the bamboo itself but also, as the text above confirms, with the name of the locality where this plant used to grow, which is still known nowadays as Rappu Falls near Akramukra. Robert Schomburgk also mentioned that the rapids of Rappoo

7 Daniel Allcock, personal communication, Surama October 2010.

8 Note attached to the object Am1960.10.62 (British Museum);

9 EBC Cat no. 31983 (Kew); Am1960.10.62 (British Museum): Donated by Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in 1960.

10 British Museum, Archives of the Centre for Anthropology, British Guiana: Catalogue of Donations from Everard F. im Thurn (1881), Cat. no.789, no.194; Note attached to the object Am1960.10.62 (British Museum).

11 Royal Botanic Gardens Kew 2009)

received their name because of the “large quantity of Bamboo (*Nastus latifolia*)” in that area (Rivière, 2006).

This episode demonstrates im Thurn’s interest in actually trying these Amerindian arrows and it reveals his efforts in wanting to know more about their culture, although he also tries to demystify the Amerindian beliefs by testing these objects and commenting on the Amerindian “naivety” (im Thurn, 1883: 25)¹².

Regarding the rappoo arrows, im Thurn does not say they were not poisonous; actually, he is very mindful about this, as confirmed in his notes, in which he mentions that “the heads of those arrows [rappoos] are made of a special kind of bamboo said to be poisonous (though this latter fact was not confirmed by my own experiments)”¹³. Im Thurn seems to be very attentive in his assumptions and consequently is always testing the veracity of the Amerindian knowledge, as a Victorian man of science would do. This attention could demonstrate im Thurn’s respect towards the Amerindian knowledge; however, it is more likely that he was simply being diplomatic towards the statements of Richard Schomburgk and C.B. Brown (im Thurn, 1883: 242). Both confirmed that the rappoo arrows were poisonous, so when im Thurn wrote, he was probably supporting what his colleagues said and was not being attentive towards the Amerindian knowledge (im Thurn, 1883: 242). He also gives the example of Brown’s account, in which the latter explained how a peccary, when “struck by a rappoo arrow, stood still, apparently paralysed, for a time, and then fell dead”. Im Thurn tried to repeat the experiment several times but he failed to replicate the same result. He justifies himself by saying that he “shot gently into a fowl, so that it entered only a very little way and not in a vital part”. When he pointed this out to the Amerindians, they explained that the poison could only take effect if the arrow went in far enough. Therefore, im Thurn assumed that only if the arrow could touch some vital spot of the animal, could the arrow be effective. In conclusion, he emphasised that “the poisonous character attributed to this bamboo-wood may be considered doubtful, until more accurate experiments have been made” (im Thurn, 1883: 242). In addition, the species name *Nastus latifolius* (Kunth) Spreng., which Robert Schomburgk previously mentioned, is a synonym of *Guadua latifolia* (Kunth) Kunth, which is the accepted name nowadays (Clayton et al., 2006). Despite the fact that im Thurn mentioned the rappoo as *Guadua* sp., it is almost certain that he was referring to the species Schomburgk mentioned, which is now named *Guadua latifolia*. Im Thurn’s experiments however did not show the bamboo’s toxicity although – the species *Guadua latifolia* is today listed as a poisonous plant (Allen, 1943; FDA, 2008)¹⁴.

12 Another similar example is when im Thurn shares an Amerindian story: ‘A plant is said to grow somewhere, a stick from which proves fatal to any living thing at which is pointed. The virtues of this are supposed to have been discovered by an Indian woman, who, when suddenly attacked by a jaguar, seized the nearest stick to defend herself, and pointed it at the animal, which immediately fell dead’. In this case, although im Thurn does not say it directly, his writing once more suggests there is an Amerindian ‘naivety’ (im Thurn, 1883: 25);

13 British Museum, Archives of the Centre for Anthropology, British Guiana: Catalogue of Donations from Everard F. im Thurn (1881), Cat. no.789, no.194.

14 At the Economic Botany Collection, Kew there are specimens of *Guadua* sp. collected by im Thurn in British Guiana (EBC37396).

The “Very Curious and Beautiful Piece of Karamanni” Wax

Karamanni wax comes from the species *Symphonia globulifera* L.f., and it is used to make rappoo arrows and has the particular function of fixing arrow heads (van Andel, 2000: 231). The karamanni is a thick, yellow latex that is extracted from this species (van Andel, 2000: 231). This latex is boiled in water and later on the beeswax is added to make it more pliable (van Andel, 2000: 231). Im Thurn also indicated that powdered ashes or charcoal may be added to turn the karamanni black (im Thurn, 1883: 315). Im Thurn described this object as a “large circular tablet of black wax (called caraman by the Indians)”¹⁵. This particular object is housed today at the Economic Botany Collections, Kew (EBC) and has a very curious and unusual appearance (Figure 4)¹⁶. The EBC has two different shapes of this particular wax: the ‘large circular tablet’, as mentioned before, and the cylindrical one, which, according to im Thurn was the most typical (Figure 4). This cylindrical shape is the result of the cooling process in which a cylindrical mould is used during this procedure. After the wax turns black it gets viscous, and while hot this liquid wax “is poured into a bamboo segment to store it for future use”, which is why it acquires a very cylindrical shape (van Andel, 2000: 231).



Figure 4. From the left to the right: Rappoo arrow (EBC31983), karamanni wax in cylindrical shape (EBC66677), ‘large circular tablet of black wax’ (EBC66698) and karamanni wax involved in tree bark (EBC72843) - Objects from the Economic Botany Collection, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (© Copyright The Board of Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)..

Im Thurn explains that usually the hollow bamboo is used in the preparation of the karamanni wax, but in the case of the “very curious and beautiful piece of karamanni” the buck pot was used to shape and harden the wax (im Thurn, 1883: 315)¹⁷.

15 At the Economic Botany Collection, Kew there are specimens of *Guadua* sp. collected by im Thurn in British Guiana (EBC37396).

16 Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Economic Botany Collection (EBC Cat no.66698).

17 Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Economic Botany Collection (EBC Cat no.66698).

Besides being used for fixing arrows, this wax is also used “in place of pitch and glue to fill up crevices in woodwork”, “to caulk the creases in boats and canoes” and in the production of the cassava-graters (van Andel, 2000: 231; im Thurn, 1883: 282, 315). The species *Symphonia globulifera* is also used for medicinal purposes. The manni tree bark can be used for diarrhoea and thrush, and its latex is known for its various medicinal properties (van Andel, 2000: 231-232). More precisely, it can be used for abscesses and swellings, and can be applied as a “disinfectant plaster on cuts and rubbed on sore lips and mouth” (van Andel, 2000: 231-232).

Through the various examples discussed, it is plausible to understand the karamanni’s effectiveness and why it was used, and indeed why the Makushi still use it to produce arrows (Figure 5). In Guyana, or more precisely in Surama, I had the opportunity to interview Daniel Allicock, one of the few Makushi people who still produce arrows nowadays (Figure 6)¹⁸. Daniel Allicock explains that the karamanni is a waterproof material, which means it can be used in arrows that can be in contact with water, such as the ones used for fishing, for instance. He also says: “If it works so well, why should we change?”¹⁹



Figure 5. Karamanni wax (Surama, Guyana, October 2010, © Sara Albuquerqueauthor’s photograph).

Although it is still possible to find the karamanni being used among the Amerindians, this is a vanishing tradition. Allicock explains that the art of producing blowpipes, arrows and bows for fishing and hunting can take some years to learn and usually the father would teach these skills to his children. The production of these objects was a very important skill that would prepare the young Amerindian for long travelling distances: it would give them the basic skills to survive in the forest as they could hunt for food and use the arrows and bows as

¹⁸ Daniel Allicock, personal communication, Surama October 2010.

¹⁹ Daniel Allicock, personal communication, Surama October 2010.

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weapons for defence²⁰. Allicock also notes that the Makushi no longer produce blowpipes, although some Wai-wai communities still do. In the Surama village in Guyana, the elder people are the only ones still producing arrows and bows. For the younger generation it is easier to buy from the elderly instead of producing these objects themselves.



Figure 6. Daniel Allicock showing the crowia or silk grass (Surama, Guyana October 2010, © Sara Albuquerqueauthor’s photograph).

Pots and Barks

The aforementioned karamanni wax production, involved the use of the buck pot as a mould to shape the wax and get a circular shape (Figure 7). In addition to being used as a mould, this pot has other importance in the Guyanese culture. The buck pot is connected with Guyanese traditions such as the traditional dish known as pepper-pot, which is still very common nowadays in Guyana. According to im Thurn’s notes, the pepper-pot is an Amerindian dish that the colonists adopted and it was the only form in which the Amerindians ate meat²¹. In his book im Thurn also mentions that pepper-pot is made by cooking fish or meat, peppers (chilis) and cassarep (which is boiled cassava juice so that it is no longer poisonous) for a long time and “boiling [them] into a sort of thick soup” (im Thurn, 1883: 260-261).

In im Thurn’s description of the pottery method he indicates that after the pot is polished and dried in the sun, drawings are made on the vessels which can be geometric, spirals, rough figures of animals, curved or straight lines (im Thurn, 1883: 277). These drawings are made from the juice of the bark of various trees, which can produce the colours red, pink, brown or black (im Thurn, 1883: 277). According to im Thurn, some of the Amerindians, for example True Caribs, even apply certain juices to the clay to produce a fine glaze on the vessel. After this process, the vessels are baked over a fire and this brings out the glaze or the drawing. Here, im Thurn indicates once more that the bark of a certain

20 Daniel Allicock, personal communication, Surama October 2010.

21 Note made by im Thurn attached to the buck pot (EBC Cat no.37797, Kew).



Figure 7. Bark of 'cauta' *Hirtella americana* (EBC37795), buck pot (EBC37797) and buck pot lid (EBC57010) - Objects from the Economic Botany Collection, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (collected Everard im Thurn 1880, British Guiana) (© Copyright The Board of Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)..

tree which is called by the Arawaks, Kawta (which probably is Kanto bark, *Hirtella americana*), is burned, ground to powder then mixed with the clay, leaving the pots very black (im Thurn, 1883: 277). In Kabakaburi (Guyana), where there is a strong Arawak community, they still produce pots in the traditional way. They apply the juice of the bark to colour the vessels, although the powdered bark is not mixed with the clay. In this particular community they use the Mapurukong tree (which is probably *Inga alba* (SW.) Willd) and extract the juice from the bark instead of using the Kanto bark as described by im Thurn (van Andel, 2000: 115).

Another example of im Thurn's cross-cultural encounters arises from an episode in which he wanted to acquire a particular pot. This provides a hint at the somewhat dubious practices that were at play in the business of collecting; he was only able to get the object after negotiating with a doubtfully sober Amerindian:

A perfected casiri-jar, especially if it is much ornamented, is highly valued; one especially fine specimen, last by bargaining for it one day when I happened to find its owner merry and goo-humoured after a long drinking feast (im Thurn, 1883: 277).

The pottery work was mainly done by women and in some cases, when they were in contact with white people, they would imitate "vessels of European structure as they may see, such as teapots, cups and saucers, tumblers, or wineglasses; but these articles are always misshapen and untrue in curve" (im Thurn, 1883: 278). Im Thurn also adds that "while the Indian women of Guiana are shaping the clay, their children, imitating them, make small pots and goglets; many of these toy vessels may be seen in and about almost every Indian house" (im Thurn, 1883: 278).

Conclusion

Concerning the Amerindian people, it is worth mentioning how they were perceived and seen in im Thurn’s time. Although im Thurn mentioned that the Amerindians were not innocent in the way they preferred to buy objects instead of producing them themselves, he still describes the Amerindians as naive, within which he seems quite patronising towards the Amerindians.

Moreover, im Thurn explains that to obtain certain objects he bargained with the Amerindians and exchanged European goods for what he wanted. Although he mentions several times that many Amerindian arts were disappearing, he was at the same time contributing to their disappearance by exposing the Amerindians to European goods in their exchange dealings. The Amerindians’ experience in dealing and negotiating with foreigners is still noticeable today, as a result of the exchanges that occurred throughout the centuries. In this respect, the fieldtrip I undertook to Guyana revealed that the Amerindians are nowadays caught in a dilemma between tradition and progress. In general, there is a certain conflict and contradiction in the Amerindians’ narrative: the desire to be in touch with a modern way of life but, at the same time, perpetuating the Amerindians’ traditions. Life has changed in Guyana since im Thurn lived there, but certain observations he made at the time are still valid today. Although the Amerindians want to keep their traditions, as one would expect, they also want to have access to better living conditions, technology, etc., like others do. Despite traditional houses made of clay bricks and palm roofs still can be seen nowadays, they are being substituted for more comfortable concrete houses with zinc roofs. The same is happening with the traditional objects that the Amerindians produce today. The Amerindian utensils, for example, are being substituted by imported ones, as im Thurn used to describe. Today, most of the Amerindians have jobs and this significant change has had an impact not only in the Amerindian way of life but also in the production of objects. There is not so much time available for Amerindian husbands to manufacture graters or matapiés baskets for their wives to produce cassava flour, for instance (Albuquerque, 2016: 8). Besides this, more Amerindian children go to school, spend less time at home, and have less time to learn about their traditions. However, during my fieldtrip in 2010, I noticed that this particular situation was a matter of concern amongst the Amerindians. As a response, Arawak, Makushi, Wai-wai and others planned to implement more activities in the local schools related to Amerindian cultural history, traditions and languages.

Everard im Thurn also mentions examples in which the Amerindians absorbed European elements. These encounters also revealed how the Europeans influenced the Amerindians in the way their objects were produced – for example, the queyus made of beads instead of seeds and the Amerindian pottery that started to imitate tea cups.

On the other hand, the particular case of the dye made of annatto, which was patented in 1775 by an English dyer, represents how Europeans absorbed elements of Indigenous knowledge. The annatto, which the Amerindians used to colour feathers and hammocks, was then “discovered” by the Europeans and patented. As David Arnold notes, “The knowledge of their uses [plants] and properties had first been established by indigenous peoples and was only sub-

sequently taken over and incorporated into European botany” (Arnold, 1996: 141-168).

Through im Thurn’s descriptions of his Amerindian encounters it is possible to trace a portrait of this Victorian character. His descriptions reveal that he was deeply interested in the Amerindian culture and the way he was testing the Rappoo arrows for instance, is a good example of this. On the other hand, it is also noticeable how frequently im Thurn compared the Amerindian culture with “more civilised ones”, showing a clear superiority in his discourse. Im Thurn’s writings, besides being influenced by the Schomburgk brothers, who in their turn were modelled by Alexander van Humboldt, also reflect a combination of natural history and ethnographic writing and more personal elements (Dalziell, 2002). However, it is important to stress that in im Thurn’s writing he is addressing an audience. The way im Thurn expressed himself does not mean he did things the way he observed or wrote about. For this reason, im Thurn’s real self will always remain unrecoverable.

Furthermore, there were also cross-cultural exchanges between the different Amerindian ethnic groups described by im Thurn in his book, *Among the Indians of Guiana*. Each Amerindian group was specialised in the production of certain objects or materials: the Warraus were known for the best canoes, the Makushis for the ourali used for poisoning arrows, and cotton hammocks, and the True Caribs for pottery (im Thurn, 1883: 271-272). Im Thurn said that in order to interchange goods, the Amerindians used to do long journeys, so news passed from one district to another (im Thurn, 1883: 273). For this reason, even if certain groups were hostile towards each other, the exchange of goods between them allowed a certain peace. The objects per se allowed different “tribes”, as im Thurn refers to the indigenous communities, to communicate with each other and helped information to be spread rapidly, through traders “who carried with them the latest news” (im Thurn, 1883: 271). In addition, these same objects could be manufactured by Makushis, exchanged for pots made by the True Caribs, ending up exchanged for European knives, for instance. In many of the objects collected by im Thurn the Amerindian group who manufactured them is not identified. This probably happened because im Thurn was aware of these interchanges between the Amerindians, therefore not sure to which group they belonged to. In im Thurn’s reports he mentions that the amount of object exchanges in the interior of British Guiana was considerable. Besides this, nowadays it is very common to find mixed communities. As a result, the objects produced are infused with entangled stories which have been passing through different ethnic groups for generations.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the explorer’s dependence on the Amerindian people that still happens nowadays. Researchers are still completely dependent on local knowledge in terms of geography, logistics, etc., and, using Burnett’s words, it is actually “impossible to make a step without the Indians” (Burnett 2002). Even more than one hundred years after im Thurn’s presence in British Guiana, this journey showed me that local knowledge remains crucial for the success of any expedition.

It is impossible to recover all the different voices involved in cross-cultural histories. However, by gathering relevant and important information, we can get closer to them.

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