

Collaborative Research on the Meteorological and Botanical History of the Indian Ocean, 1600-1900

Summary of Meeting to discuss funding options – March 21st 2014 – University of Sussex

Present:

Vinita Damodaran
Rob Iliffe
George Adamson
David Nash
Rob Allan
Anna Jordanous
James Hamilton

Members of the network met to discuss the continuation of network project beyond the end-date of current funding and possible sources of funding, in part in order to clarify such matters in advance of the May meeting with representatives of Indian institutions.

Focus; Archives, regions and period

In discussing the spatial focus GA, RI and DN noted the significance of island archives, particularly those held in Mauritius which cover Reunion and Madagascar as well as Mauritius itself, going back as far as 1600. Such records are complimented by mission archives for Zanzibar, also covering nearby islands which are held at the Bodleian. The general area of interest was defined as East Africa, India, Indian Ocean Islands and Indonesia. RA noted the possibility of including Australian archives. In looking to extend into SE Asia the expertise of Fiona Williamson and Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells are noted. DN stated the desirability of gaining Dutch and Norwegian partners in order to help gain access to W. Australian and other missionary archives. Groups at Freiburg and Bern are noted as useful potential partners, as is Stefan Voigt for his work on Arabic archives. Other significant developments in this region include the BL's digitisation of records from Qatar and Anna Winerbottom's forthcoming work in Oman. Jemima Schaffer's expertise in East Africa along with the up-coming regional conference in Mozambique to be attended by both VD and RA are further noted. Here DN drew attention to the masses of material in the Cape archives which reach back to 1651. RI counselled in favour of a focus on easily extractable data, valuing log-book entries above diaries. GA noted that the BL's collection of log books is un-digitised before 1870, constituting 75% of their total collection.

It was decided that the nature, availability and perhaps vulnerability of archives should dictate the temporal focus. DN suggested that the physical location of archives may be more significant than their regional focus, funding being seen as more available for saving threatened archives than for digitising material held safely in colonial centres. The masses of instrumental data collected from 1830-1850 onwards was noted as an obstacle to attaining anything approaching completeness for this period, therefore a focus on the earlier period is suggested with general agreement.

> Knowledge of what archives Indian institutions would like digitised or feel are vulnerable is noted as necessary to gaining any idea of the amount of funding to be pursued. JH to draft a letter requesting this information.

General agreement is reached that the initial focus should be on something in the region of 4-8 key archives and within these on achieving full coverage for their earliest period. In the first instance

high-quality, future-proof data capture would be the goal with collection of meta data to follow, perhaps through crowd sourcing via Citizen Science and Galaxy Alliance groups. A catalogue enabling work by other groups to be 'bolted on' should be the 'backbone' of the project's output.

Funding

In regard to funding RI noted that the focus on the facilitation of research rather than on the production of scholarly work may mean that research councils are inappropriate bodies to fund such a project, the Horizon 20-20 research infrastructure scheme and the EU seen as more likely to provide money on the scale required – a ball park figure of £5-6m is suggested – the possibility of EU-India link funding is also raised. The philanthropic group Arcadia are suggested as there is precedence of their funding digital and environmental projects, the 'I hope' group are also mentioned as possible collaborators/funders.

>VD to contact Arcadia group, John Deehan of 'I hope' via Mark Elvin, and to consult Amelia Wakefield on funding application deadlines.

>GA to look at Sendari project as a potentially instructive example.

VD noted that £100,000 of follow-on funding from AHRC is available if it can be demonstrated that work will open up material to new audiences. The receipt of £45,000 from IDS in return for one article on historic climate uncertainty was announced.

The importance of a large network, linked by firm and binding commitments is agreed upon. The building of such a network including somewhere in the region of 20 archives and institutional partners would be seen to constitute a major achievement, in this regard the NHM's place within the project is raised and noted as of central importance. Part of an EU funding bid would be the commitment of funds from partner institutions.

>RI to contact Jim Broden (international engagement) of NHM in advance of his attendance at the May meeting.

Projects

VD suggested a pilot project perhaps using the FRI Dehra Dun archives, AJ suggested focussing on linking existing digital archives relating to Banks, Hooker, Wallich etc. here RA noted that Banks' Australian records are already available online. GA suggests this link-up as a possible use for the AHRC follow-on grant.

May meeting

It is agreed that the goal of the meeting should be to gain a firm commitment from the Indian institutions to share existing digital archival data and to open up physical archives for digitisation under the aegis of the network. Here it is noted that emphasis must be placed on exchange and safeguarding of vulnerable materials rather than simple opening up of Indian archives to Western scholars in order to allay any fears of the project becoming in anyway neo-colonial.

The morning session – which is currently taken up by presentations outlining the type of work done by network members – is to be shrunk dramatically so as to make more time for discussion of commitments.

>GA to present on the future of the network drawing heavily from the discussions recorded here.