

Caroline Cornish

I have just completed a PhD at Royal Holloway, University of London entitled *Curating Science in an Age of Empire: Kew's Museum of Economic Botany* and my research interests cover museum history and geography, history and geography of science, and colonial networks. A key goal in this study has been to gain a greater understanding of how museums produce knowledge, and more specifically to define the nature of nineteenth-century economic botany and the contribution made to it by the Kew Museum. My primary sources are museum objects – specifically in this case, the Economic Botany Collection at RBG, Kew - which, I argue, can be ‘read’ according to their materiality, their inscriptions, and their supporting documentation. Methodologically speaking, I adopt an ‘object biography’ approach to tracing the lives of things and hence the networks of knowledge across which they travelled. This inevitably leads one to destinations beyond the object’s current locus.

Regarding the Indian Ocean region specifically, I have sought to reinscribe the role of indigenous actors into the history of colonial museums in the former British India. Imperial archives, such as that of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew hold little pertaining to Indian curators, collectors, and scientists and their part in the production of scientific knowledge, and this necessitated a research trip to the Indian Museum at Kolkata, the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai, and the Forestry Research Institute at Dehradun, where such sources were to be had. Interdisciplinary collaboration, in the form of a digitisation project, particularly with museums, research institutes, and archives in the Indian Ocean region, would permit greater access to sources such as these, facilitate the construction of detailed object biographies and thus enable a more dispersed view of empire. However, I would be keen to see museum and other collected objects involved as much as manuscripts, published texts, images, and correspondence.

I am currently involved in the Open University’s *Commodity Histories* project, and I hope to commence a post-doctoral project in 2013 involving the RBG, Kew and the Natural History Museum under the AHRC’s Cultural Engagement scheme.