

## The Relational Museum

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Just how we should think about, and work in, museums is a considerable question at the beginning of the 21st century. Older ways of thinking about museums, as sets of static, decontextualised objects, are unhelpful and inaccurate. Museum objects are in a very definite set of contexts, even if they have been through a series of networks and relations to get where they are at present. The Relational Museum project, which ran from 2002 to 2006, was based around the idea that museum objects to some degree conceal the mass of relations that lie behind them, ranging from the people who originally made and used the objects, to all parties to their trade and transfer and ending, for now at least, with the curators, conservators and visitors who make up the museum community in the present.

Charting the relations that have helped compose a museum will provide insights into the colonial relations of administrators, missionaries, travellers and anthropologists, the changing situations of local people responding to and participating in these colonial forces, shifting intellectual fashions in the metropolitan centre lying behind collections and a mass of biographies of people of all types whose lives were entangled with objects and collections. Museum collections represent a privileged form of historical source composed of the objects themselves and the various links to other material backgrounds they have enjoyed, written and oral histories, archival materials, photographs and film. The Relational Museum project looked at the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford from 1884, when the museum was set up, to 1945, the beginning of the end of the British Empire. The project was funded by the ESRC and directed by Chris Gosden and Mike O'Hanlon, but the real work was done by the two researchers on the project Frances Larson, who concentrated on archival and historical work and Alison Petch, whose main task was to enhance the computerised databases of the Pitt Rivers and to carry out a mass of statistical analyses on them looking at when objects came in, where they came from and through which hands or conduits. In addition to articles, the project had two main outcomes – a website <http://history.prm.ox.ac.uk/> and a book, [Knowing Things](#). Both are linked and meant to be understood together. Although the book is the result of our reflections, the website contains material for anyone interested to carry out their own analyses.

The main aim of our project was to investigate the sets of relationships between people and things that make up the Pitt Rivers Museum. Let us start with one small example of what these relationships might involve. There are two 'jew's harps' in the Pitt Rivers Museum – these are small, inconspicuous bamboo instruments that are held against the lips and plucked with the fingers. The Museum's curator, Henry Balfour, acquired these two instruments in the Naga Hills of India in 1922. He was staying with his friend, James Mills, a Sub-Divisional Officer with the Indian Civil Service who was stationed at Mokokchung in the Naga Hills. On 1st December, Balfour visited a Chang Naga man called Ngaku, who worked as an interpreter at Mokokchung. They spent a 'cheery' time together discussing local traditions and practices, before the mother of a friend of Ngaku's played the jew's harp for their British visitor. After 'quite a pleasing melodious

performance', the old woman gave Balfour two similar instruments for his 'memsahib', by which she probably meant Balfour's wife. Memsahib is the female form of the Hindi word 'sahib', then used as respectful address for Europeans in India. From the use of this single word we know that during the course of the transaction Balfour was implicated in the existing social hierarchies in Mokokchung and India as a whole. The two jew's harps are now in the collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, but they were not accessioned until 1939, the year Balfour died. His wife, Edith, had passed away in 1938, so perhaps he did give them to her as the Naga lady had intended (the details supplied here are drawn from Balfour's notebooks of his trip to Nagaland, held in the Pitt Rivers Museum and from documentation pertaining to the objects themselves).

These two bamboo instruments have quickly drawn us into a little cluster of relationships, involving Mills, Balfour, Ngaku, Ngaku's friend's mother, and Balfour's wife. We cannot now know what Ngaku and his elderly friend understood of the Pitt Rivers Museum, if anything, but their stories have been part of the institution ever since, because their actions and interactions helped to create it, albeit in a small way. Rather than being distant observers, Ngaku and his friend are participants in the formation of the Pitt Rivers Museum. They are implicated and involved, and integral to the institution as a whole. Museums emerge through thousands of relationships like these; through the experiences of anthropological subjects, collectors, curators, lecturers and administrators, amongst others, and these experiences have always been mediated and transformed by the material world, by artefacts, letters, trains, ships, furniture, computers, display labels, and so on. No one person or group of people can completely control the identity of a museum. They have multiple authors, who need not be aware of their role nor even necessarily willing contributors. But however else each person's involvement differs, all of their relationships cohere around things. It is objects that have drawn people together, helped to define their interactions, and made them relevant to the Museum. This project had a series of intersecting research themes concerning variously the disciplinary histories of archaeology and anthropology, the history of museums within Oxford (itself embedded in broader discussions concerning the sciences and humanities), the nature of colonial histories as illuminated through the movement of objects, links with originating communities and an overarching concern for the relations between people and things. These themes include many of the big current issues within archaeology, anthropology and science and technology studies, so that a lot has been written about these topics, but we know of no one work which has combined in the way we have, focussing crucially on the collections of one large institution which provides coherence and focus.

The general ambit of thought within which we are working is that which explores the interactions and relationships between people and things. The notion is that people and things are equal (although different) players in the creation of social relations, institutions, knowledge and politics. Such ideas allow material things to be active players in the human world in manners which are still controversial and debated – in what sense objects are active or are agents is not at all clear or agreed and many are unhappy with this line of thought altogether (Gell 1998, Ingold 2000, Latour 1993, 2005, Strathern 1996). A museum which has lasted several human generations is given continuity through the objects in it, which are conventionally seen to be the museum, rather than the people. For museums it may be an issue as to how far people are active players.

The key idea of the Relational Museum is to look at the relationships between people and things in

an historical context, charting how both continuity and change arise. Rather to our surprise a key issue has become through the course of the project a question about the nature of knowledge and the manner in which knowledge is embodied as well as, or instead of, being a mental construction. In the early twenty first century a number of divisions are breaking down, first of all between disciplines such as archaeology and anthropology, but also between key conceptual divisions such as culture and nature, or mind and matter. The Pitt Rivers Museum was established in 1884 at a period in which disciplinary boundaries had not been drawn up and the conceptual landscape different to that of today. There is no way in which we can return to the intellectual landscape of the late nineteenth century, but this was a world sufficiently different from our own to shake up now established forms of thought and provide some inspiration for the future. In particular, a general lack of distinction was made, by people like E. B. Tylor, between the material and the mental, so that objects were seen as materialisations of ideas, interacting with the skills of the body, as much as the operations of the mind.

Our particular focus has been on one museum, that of the Pitt Rivers, in the first 60 years of its history. There is a considerable literature on the history of museums and collecting (e.g. Barringer and Flynn 1998, Pearce 1995) but there has been surprisingly little in the way of detailed empirical studies of individual institutions and their collections. This, we suspect, is because working out when collections came into a museum, from whom and from where has been very difficult, a difficult now partly overcome through searchable electronic databases. We feel that our work has made a unique contribution in a number of important areas.

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Jenness and Marius Barbeau. Front row from left - Henry Balfour, Arthur Thomson and Robert Ranulph Marett.

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We have charted the first sixty years of the Museum's existence looking at the intellectual, institutional and political forces influential in its creation. This has been made possible through the creation of electronic versions of the Museum's catalogues which can be searched relatively rapidly and systematically. Because the Museum's holdings are so large and various, now comprising some 275,000 objects from all continents of the world, we chose a number of routes into the collections, particularly those provided by the collectors. Some 4000 people are known to have collected objects in the 'field' (whether this is West Africa, Tasmania or north Oxfordshire) which they gave to the Museum, either directly or indirectly. Such a large number of collectors threw light on issues of class, gender and social networks which lay behind the Museum's collections. We also concentrated on a number of topics (stone tools, toys and games, head hunting to take a few) important to the history of the Museum in various ways. Lastly, we selected out a small number of people either within the Museum or outside, who threw light on different aspects of the Museum's history. This group was made up first of Pitt Rivers himself whose gift of 20,000 objects provided the starting point for the Museum. Analysis of this collection, which built up from the 1850s onwards, allowed us to extend our period of analysis back to the middle of the nineteenth century. Henry Balfour was employed for a year to unpack Pitt Rivers' collection but stayed in the Museum until his death in 1939 and became the major force behind the build up of the collections through travel, letter writing and conversation which meant that he either gathered objects himself or encouraged others to collect. E. B. Tylor, the first professional anthropologist in Britain, was employed as Keeper of the University Museum from 1883 and oversaw the acquisition and initial ordering of the Museum. He had much less hands-on connection with the objects than Balfour but was the major intellectual force behind the Museum in the 1880s and 1890s, producing important work on objects and their role in religious life, magic and technology.

### *Henry Balfour, Upper Gallery PRM some time in 1890s*

John Hutton never worked for the Museum, but became a member of the Indian Civil Service in 1909, working in particular in Assam and especially in the Naga Hills. Through his friendship with Balfour, Hutton collected large amounts of material, especially from Naga, which he gave to the Museum. He also formed a focus for others to collect and donate. Hutton was a small, but exemplary, element of the British colonial world and its entanglement with anthropology and collection. In 1937 Hutton became William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Charles Seligman's major institutional affiliation was with the LSE, but he, with his wife Brenda, was a major collector for a number of different institutions including the Pitt Rivers Museum. The Seligman archive at the LSE provides considerable detail on the Seligmans' style of fieldwork in the Sudan, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and New Guinea and the impact that their survey mode of work had on patterns of collection of objects given to the Pitt Rivers Museum. Our final collector was Beatrice Blackwood who worked for a long time in the Department of Anatomy at Oxford, but latterly at the Pitt Rivers Museum where she stayed as an active presence until her death in 1975. Blackwood carried out fieldwork in north America and New Guinea which resulted in important collections. She was attracted to a Malinowskian style of fieldwork, more sedentary than the Seligmans, but was never quite able to achieve her aims, partly because of demands by Balfour to collect for the Museum. Blackwood was an important teacher of ethnography using the Museum's collections, as well as being instrumental in setting up the catalogues that were later to be digitised to form the base for the Relational Museum project. We chose this range of collectors to provide some chronological span, which provided an insight into changing intellectual interests, styles of fieldwork and thoughts about the centrality of material culture to anthropology. The resulting work was not a history of the Pitt Rivers Museum but a series of key insights into aspects of its history, which can be used to throw light on key questions in the present.

The 'Relational Museum' project team was interested not only in knowing more about the individuals who contributed to the PRM but also to understanding more about the networks of people who created the museums collections. We were quickly confronted by a daunting mass of information concerning thousands of collectors and donors who have contributed to the Museum's development, and the thousands and thousands of objects with which they were associated. All these people and things were interconnected to varying degrees in complex ways. We considered that when faced with a complicated, shifting circulation of people and things that is literally endless – as is the case when considering the history of a museum, a person's life, a business or a laboratory – network analysis was a stimulating and revealing methodological tool. We hoped it would throw up patterns in sets of social relationships hard to perceive otherwise, and that it would be a spur to more in-depth, nuanced research. This complexity might be clearer if seen through an example. Take a collection of around 80 objects, primarily pottery eating bowls, water vases, cooking pots and ladles, from the Zuni and Hopi people of Arizona and New Mexico. These particular objects were collected by James Stevenson, who, in 1879, led to the first research expedition for the Smithsonian's newly formed Bureau of Ethnology to study Zuni and Hopi cultures. The collection – made sometime between 1879 and 1884 – passed from Stevenson to John Wesley Powell, who was Director of the Bureau, and then from Powell to Henry Nottidge

Moseley, who was Oxford's Linacre Professor of Comparative Anatomy. Moseley was great friends with E.B. Tylor. It may well be that he acquired the collection from Powell during his visit to Canada and the United States in 1884, since he and Tylor traveled together and spent some time studying the cultures of New Mexico during this trip. Tylor and Moseley managed the administration of Pitt Rivers Collection when it first arrived in Oxford in the mid-1880s, so it is no surprise that his wife, Amabel Nevill Moseley, donated his ethnological collections to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1896, five years after his death. This small group of objects passed through four pairs of hands – Stevenson's, Powell's, Henry Moseley's, and Amabel Moseley's – before entering the collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum. The Museum contains well over 275,000 objects, so it is easy to see how complicated such sets of social relationships can become. Many, although by no means all, of the people who collected and donated objects were known to each other and moved in the same social and intellectual circles. They might have worked together, or traveled together, or been members of the same clubs and societies, or met the same people during the course of their research. The same field collectors sometimes supplied objects to a number of different secondary collectors, who later gave their material to the Museum. The scale and complexity of the relationships that have constituted the Pitt Rivers Museum led us to seek alternative ways of visualizing and analyzing our data. We used network analysis to complement our in-depth historical research with some broader exploration of these sets of associations and relationships en masse. The late nineteenth century is often seen (and caricatured) as a period of intellectual certainty when people pursued an 'onwards and upwards' notion of history within an evolutionary framework. By contrast we found this to be a period of intellectual openness in which people were exploring the nature of human culture, its links to the material world and its intellectual manifestations. The Pitt Rivers Collection was initially taken into the University Museum, which had itself opened in 1860 as a physical location which could bring together the various sciences in Oxford, but within an holistic conception where the links between physics, chemistry and anatomy could be sought. The Pitt Rivers collection became part of the Anatomy Department, so that human products were conceived on in comparative terms in much the same manner as biological organisms. The divisions between natural things and human products were not made, partly because people like Balfour were trained in the Natural Sciences before working on artifacts. Both archaeology and anthropology emerged through a series of links between the sciences and classics, which seem unlikely today, brought together in the person of someone like E. B. Tylor who ranged widely between interests in fire drills or flint tools on the one hand to the differences between magic, myth and religion on the other. As the twentieth century progressed this open intellectual atmosphere was divided up due to the growth of disciplinary specialisms, so that at the end of his life Balfour was defending his broad conception of anthropology, and the importance of the Museum within that, against the newly-appointed Radcliffe-Brown, Professor of Social Anthropology, who wanted more specialist teaching and a division made between the older generalist degrees (Gosden et al. 2007). It was against these changing backgrounds that collecting took place and the role of material culture was debated. Although an over-simplification, it is possible to say that the debates within anthropology in the 1920s and 1930s were between an older more materialist view of the subject, in which material culture was central, to a newer post-Durkheimian stress on social relations. These debates are still being pursued today.

The main results from the project were analyses of the collections themselves, either pursued statistically or through the archives. As described in the Methods section we carried out a series of searches through the electronic catalogues of the Museum to discover when, from where and via which hands the collections came. We now know in great detail about the structure of collections from the various continents or countries or individual major collectors. Such statistics allow us to gain an overview of the collections as a whole, from which various surprises emerge, which include the number of stone tools we have in the collections (about a third of the collections are stone tools) or the number of objects from England (we have some 30,000 objects from England alone, which form the basis for a follow-on project). We can see that there was a lag between areas entering the Empire and collections flowing into Oxford – in the case of East Africa, annexed in the 1890s, material does not really flow into the Museum until the 1920s. A key result is to uncover the huge number of people (almost 4000) who contributed objects to the Museum that they had collected in the field which allows us to look at the broad community of collectors in terms of their class, gender and social connections, a vital result for the Relational Museum project. The raw data for this element of the project is provided on the Pitt Rivers Museum website (<http://history.prm.ox.ac.uk/>). One important element of this presentation is that people can search the website for themselves, if they are interested in an individual or a network of people who engaged in collecting, so that the results of the project lie not just in what we have been able to deduce about the collections but also what others can explore for themselves using the new and expanded information on the Museum.

We have attempted to make the objects and the museum itself active players in its history and constitution, starting with the question of what is a museum? Museums seem to be defined and circumscribed institutions, but in fact they spread out into space, existing also trans-temporally, raising questions about where the museum is and how it is constituted. Museums also seem to be objects collected by people, but it is easy to reverse this formulation and see objects drawing people into the Museum, through various forms of attraction of form and function. Tylor developed the concept of animism, a belief in the capacity that objects had to act and move which he felt was held by many people in the world and in some ways museums can be seen as being composed of objects animating people. The typological form of thought employed by Pitt Rivers, Balfour and Tylor divided up the world into a series of categories of objects, which could then be displayed in and through the Museum. This represents a very different intellectual approach to the forms of relational thought with which we work today, in which categories are temporary entities arising out of a network of connections between entities. The comparisons and contrasts between categorical and relational thought could be productively explored further.

As the Pitt Rivers Museum came into existence in Oxford in the 1880s this caused a considerable realignment of the University's collections, with large transfers of ethnographic material from the Ashmolean Museum and smaller ones from the University Museum of Natural History. The University's collections represent a form of categorisation of the world and collections change in shape as such categories change. The Pitt Rivers internally also can be seen as a means of representing the world through its collections, a representation transformed through changing intellectual and other interests. It is perhaps no surprise that there are so many stone tools from Australia, but it is slightly more thought provoking that there is a considerable amount of material to

do with witchcraft and magic from England or many Ashanti gold weights from West Africa, the former part of an attempt to work through so-called 'primitive' traits at home, the latter concerning an unsuspected sophistication of measurement and commerce amongst people outside Europe and Asia. Anomalies and puzzles were worked through in the Museum as much as the expected being reflected and this is a large part of its charm today.

We coined the term 'participatory anthropology' to look the range of collectors and source communities which helped created the Museum's collections in the first sixty years of its existence. The Museum today is also trying to re-embrace forms of participation which allow real engagement with the collections and their possible significance. Ostensibly, the aim of this project has been to uncover the history of the Museum, but through working on this history we have uncovered many features that are still of relevance today and by making the history of the Museum accessible on the Web we hope to encourage more interactions with the collections both in a virtual and real form.

We feel that the project was a considerable success, but that an infinite number of similar projects might be possible at other institutions, which could eventually be joined into some sort of larger mapping of communities, colonial connections and institutional connections of various kinds. The ultimate aim of such mapping would be not just to understand the past, but to gain insights into the conditions which gave rise to collections and connections, so that these can be used as sets of raw materials in the present for making new sets of relationships between all parties in a post-colonial world.

One outcome of the Relational Museum project is follow up work on Englishness, also funded by the ESRC. Englishness is a recurrent issue within the identity politics of the British Isles, being generally framed as a problem, not a solution; a question rather than an answer. Debates about the definition of Englishness have come to the fore again recently, making it an ideal time for us to reconsider the history of the concept over the last century. Many writers make the point that modern concepts of Englishness developed at the end of the nineteenth century in a context marked by the rise of Germany and France as national powers, as well as worries about the decline of Empire (Colls 2002, Colls and Dodd 1986, Kumar 2003). It is no coincidence that just over a century later debates about what it means to be English are again achieving prominence in a context of perceived external threats through terrorism, immigration and globalization (Blunkett 2005). The nineteenth century construction of English identity was enacted and transformed through a range of publications, and the creation of university positions and other institutions designed to explore and propagate what it meant to be English. At first sight it might seem strange that Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum - founded in 1884 and overtly an ethnographic museum dealing with exotic peoples - should be involved in such developments. However, a considerable proportion of the collections of the PRM prove to be from England, ranging between then contemporary items and archaeological material.

We shall argue that the collections of the PRM were involved in attempts to define what it meant to be English in a manner which took a material form. Much of the change through the nineteenth century which put identity at risk concerned the material world, through the production of mass-produced goods, the rise of consumer society and an empirical science. It should come as no surprise that thoughts about local identity should take the form of collecting craft products, items

concerned with witchcraft and magic or the making of folk music. The links between material culture and Englishness have been little studied. The English collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum offer a rich set of possibilities, allowing us to look both at the objects, but also the people who collected them, who were in many cases involved more broadly in setting up the Folklore Society or the Folk-Song Society. The English collections will provide a unique insight into the construction of the concept, but also an excellent starting point for looking at the mix of intellectual, biographical and social motives for collection, allowing us to set these within a wider context through the analysis of relevant archives and published sources. The result will be an ethnography not of the English, but of the construction of Englishness in the past and its continuing resonances today. Initial results from the project are to be found on a website still under construction -

<http://england.prm.ox.ac.uk/>

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