NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

Slavery and the natural world

Chapter 2: People and the slave trade

Context

This material is part of a wider project on slavery and the natural world, carried out at the Natural History Museum, 2006–08. The information is based on documents held in the Museum's libraries, and explores the links between nature (especially the knowledge, and transfer, of plants), people with an interest in natural history (mainly European writers from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) and the history and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade[1].

More can be found in the original documents, written by natural historians at the time of slavery. Contact the Natural History Museum Library www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/library/ +44 (0) 20 7942 5000. The additional references section has other useful sources such as relevant articles, books, journals and websites.

Please note that the information given is for historical interest only. The Natural History Museum cannot endorse any of the medicines, medical claims or advice given here. Do not take any medicines or treatments without first consulting a qualified practitioner.

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1 For more background information see Chapter 1: The project.

1. Introduction

The transatlantic slave trade involved many millions of people, and its history and legacy have had an impact all over the world. There were European slave traders, ships' captains and sailors as well as African traders and the African people captured and enslaved. Indigenous peoples inhabited the Americas before European colonisation, but their populations were significantly reduced through enslavement and disease brought by the transatlantic slave trade. Although the actual numbers are contested, it is clear that the single largest group of people affected were enslaved Africans.

The evidence used in this research is from books, documents and diaries, held by the Natural History Museum, that were written by Europeans who travelled to the Americas. Some people were sent as part of their work as soldiers or doctors but were also interested in studying the natural world around them[2]. Many naturalists, however, travelled specifically to discover more about the natural world, and many wanted to find medicinal plants. The documents described the plants, animals and geology of the Americas, and some included observations of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples of the Americas were also mentioned in these documents, although the records only describe them through a European perspective[3].

European naturalists and the sciences of botany (the study of plants) and entomology (the study of insects) benefited enormously from the specimens collected in Africa and the European colonies of the Americas. Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans contributed to collecting these specimens and therefore to the development of science.

These indigenous people and Africans are often unnamed, with a few exceptions, such as Kwasi who had a plant, *Quassia amara,* named after him by Carl Linnaeus. There are other exceptions, such as Joanna, who was described in great detail because of her relationship to John Gabriel Stedman; and Tomba, who was an example of the many Africans who resisted enslavement. Unusually, his name was also recorded.

2 John Atkins, Henry Barham and John Gabriel Stedman were good examples of ships' surgeons and a soldier who developed an interest in natural history and wrote their observations of the Americas and the transatlantic slave trade, see Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgment.

3 See also Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgment.

2. Case studies: Europeans

Europeans saw Africa and the Americas as places rich in plants to exploit for profit[4]. Natural historians[5] saw them as places to advance their knowledge of science. In the 1600s collecting natural history specimens was popular and profitable across Europe, especially in Holland and France as well as Britain. These countries had overseas colonies and many specimens were sent back to Europe. Specimens from Africa and the Americas played an important part in the development of botany (plants) and entomology (insects).

▲ Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), Picture Library reference 4251 © The Natural History Museum, London

Cabinets of curiosity[6] became popular and many specimens were considered 'exotic'. They also had commercial as well as scientific value.

Carl Linnaeus[7] was a Swedish scientist famous for classifying the natural world into groups, and particularly for providing the system of a two-part (binomial) Latin name for plants and animals that is still in use today. He was influential in developing the science of taxonomy[8].

He only travelled in the northern hemisphere – his furthest expedition was to Lapland – but naturalists and students sent him specimens from all over the known world, including some from the tropical regions of Asia, Africa and the Americas. These specimens enabled Linnaeus to make such a significant contribution to science.

4 See Chapter 3: Commercial plants.

5 People with an interest in studying and describing living things and natural objects, especially plants, animals and minerals, are called natural historians. Natural history includes the sciences of zoology, mineralogy, geology and palaeontology. At the time of the transatlantic slave trade many natural historians were amateurs and had other professional interests such as farming, medicine or commercial trade.

6 Cabinets of curiosity became very fashionable in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were rooms, or cupboards, containing objects including natural history specimens. These collections were the basis for museums (see, for example, section 2.1 Hans Sloane).

7 See linnean.org/ and www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/science-of-natural-history/biographies/linnaeus/linnaeus.html.

8 Taxonomy is the science of identifying and naming species and organising them into systems of classification.

2.1 Hans Sloane

▲ Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753),
Picture Library reference 4273
© The Natural History Museum, London

Hans Sloane was born in Ireland in 1660[9]. He died in 1753. He lived in London for most of his life and became a wealthy and popular doctor. His passion was natural history and he collected a huge number of plants and animals, as well as coins. He was President of the Royal Society from 1727 to 1741.

At the age of 27, Hans Sloane went to Jamaica, as physician (doctor) to the Duke of Albemarle, governor of the island. While he was in Jamaica, Sloane collected over 800 plant specimens, as well as live animals, shells and rocks, and wrote notes on local plants, animals and people's customs.

He described many aspects of enslaved Africans' lives in detail, and collected a number of cultural artefacts, including musical instruments[10]. His writings described the slave trade and slavery, as well as the transfer of plants by slave traders from west Africa to Jamaica.

However, Hans Sloane's writings often seem ambiguous; it is not clear what personal perspective he took on slavery and the slave trade. While he wrote in detail about the knowledge enslaved Africans had of plants, he did not seen to value their medical traditions and interpretations[11].

> 'I have heard a great deal of their great Feats in curing several Diseases, but could never find them any way reasonable, nor successful in any...' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, pliii–lv)

He did state that local people were helpful in locating plants, but without wider knowledge he thought that they could not use them beneficially and indeed may have done harm with them. Hans Sloane wrongly thought no diseases or medical conditions existed in the Caribbean that he had not seen in Europe, and he preferred European treatments, including blood letting and purging, to traditional cures.

Hans Sloane returned to London, after only 15 months in Jamaica, when the Duke of Albemarle died. However, in 1695 he married Elizabeth Rose, the widow of Fulke Rose, a wealthy Jamaican planter, so money made from the slave trade almost certainly helped fund his passion for collecting.

9 See: www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/science-of-natural-history/biographies/index.html for information on Hans Sloane and other natural historians.
10 Hans Sloane may well have been the first person anywhere to collect objects relating specifically to slavery and the transatlantic slave trade.
11 See also Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgement.

The pressed and dried plant specimens he brought back from Jamaica were pasted into seven large books (a herbarium[12]) and described in great detail in his publications. This process contributed significantly to the science of natural history. He published a brief list of the plants he had seen (1696), and a much more comprehensive, illustrated, two-volume book, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, with the Natural History of … the Last of Those Islands* (1707 and 1725).

As well as bringing back natural history specimens, Hans Sloane brought back a recipe to England for drinking chocolate[13].

His collections grew until corridors and rooms in his house were filled from top to bottom with over 71,000 plants, animals, gemstones, coins and antiquities. He also had 50,000 books, prints and manuscripts. He obtained collections from other botanists including James Petiver and Mark Catesby (see section 2.5), which contained many more plants.

In his will, Hans Sloane offered his collection to the nation for £20,000 for the 'improvement, knowledge and information of all persons'[14]. The money was raised by a lottery, and the collection became the core of the British Museum when it first opened in 1759. The natural history specimens were moved to a new building in 1881, what is now the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, London.

Hans Sloane's collections and writings are a significant element connecting the Natural History Museum to the history of the transatlantic slave trade.

2.2 Joseph Banks

▲ Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820),
Picture Library reference 51908
© The Natural History Museum, London

Joseph Banks was born in 1743 to a wealthy family. He died in 1820. He was an explorer and naturalist, with a passion for botany[15]. He strongly supported science and was President of the Royal Society for a record 42 years.

Joseph Banks took part in Captain James Cook's first great voyage around the world from 1768 to 1771 and brought back many exotic species from the South Pacific. Joseph Banks saw plants as key to making agriculture profitable, both in England and in the colonies. He became adviser to King George III and had many plants from around the world sent to him to cultivate in Kew Gardens. He was the unofficial Director of Kew and had his own private herbarium, which also became part of the Natural History Museum's collections.

12 A herbarium is a collection of preserved plant specimens, dried and mounted on paper.
13 See Chapter 3: Commercial plants.
14 See also www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/projects/sloane-herbarium/hanssloane.htm.
15 For more background information see: www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/science-of-natural-history/biographies/joseph-banks/joseph-banks.html.

Joseph Banks was able to influence some areas of government policy, and it was Banks who instructed Captain Bligh to import breadfruit (*Artocarpus altilis*) to the Caribbean from Tahiti as a cheap way of feeding enslaved people[16]. Breadfruit was only one example of the many plants exchanged between different parts of the world directly or indirectly through the work of Joseph Banks. He corresponded with William Wright, a doctor and plantation holder, who influenced his views on slavery[17].

2.3 Maria Merian

▲ Anna Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717), Picture Library reference 4886
© The Natural History Museum, London

Maria Merian was born in Germany in 1647 to a family of artists. She lived most of her life in the Netherlands, and died there in 1717. She was a naturalist as well as an artist, and as a child insects fascinated her. Her diaries show she observed how silkworms change (metamorphose) into moths when she was just 13, nine years before this was published in Europe. Previously, it was widely thought that insects were generated from decaying leaf matter.

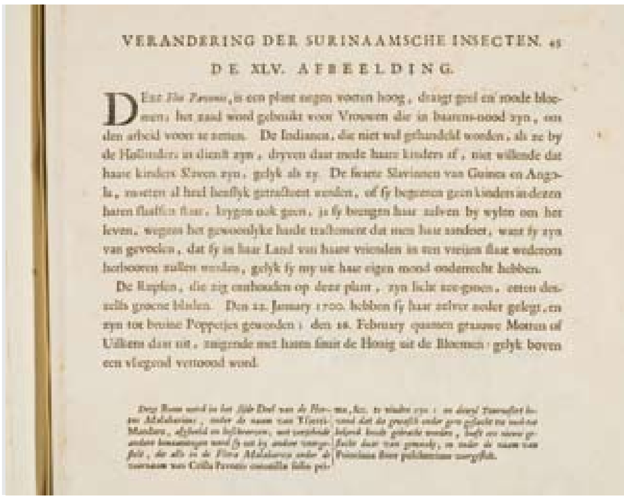
There were few female natural historians in the eighteenth century. At 52, Maria travelled to Suriname, South America, with one of her daughters and spent two years studying insects there. It was extremely rare for women to travel on their own to study science in this way. She published a successful book with 60 illustrations called *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (1705), rich with tropical flowers and fruit, insects of all kinds, especially butterflies, moths and caterpillars. This was highly respected in the eighteenth century by scholars such as Carl Linnaeus. Maria Merian's work became discredited over time,[18] and it is only relatively recently that she has become acknowledged as the 'mother of entomology', as she is now known, for her work on insects.

Maria Merian also established the mutually dependent (symbiotic) relationship between particular insects and plants, documented the differences between moths and butterflies and produced the first large coloured plate books of insects (entomology).

Among the plants Maria Merian described was the peacock flower, *Caesalpinia pulcherrima*, which she called Flos pavonis, used both by indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans to cause abortions and suicide as a direct response to enslavement and sexual exploitation[19].

16 See Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition.
17 Joseph Banks' views on the slave trade are covered in Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgement.
18 See Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgement, where the possible reasons for her work being discredited are discussed.
19 See also Schiebinger, 2004.

▲ Flos pavonis (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*), Merian, 1705 © The Natural History Museum, London



VERANDERING DER SURINAAMSCHE INSECTEN.

DE XLV. AFBEELDING.

▲ An extract from *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*..., 1705, describing 'Flos pavonis' © The Natural History Museum, London

> 'This plant Flos pavonis has parts which are used by the slave women to induce abortion. The Indian slave women are very badly treated by their white enslavers and do not wish to bear children who must live under equally horrible conditions. The black slave women, imported mainly from Guinea and Angola, also try to avoid pregnancy with their white enslavers and actually seldom beget children. They often use the root of this plant to commit suicide in the hope of returning to their native land through reincarnation, so that they may live in freedom with their relatives and loved ones in Africa while their bodies die here in slavery, as they have told me themselves.' (Merian, quoted in Counter, 2006)

Caesalpinia pulcherrima[20] is still used widely in traditional Chinese and Indian medicine and is being studied for its antiviral and antibacterial medicinal qualities[21]. Allen Counter recently reported:

> '*Caesalpinia pulcherrima* – the plant I had identified back then as ayoowiri. This plant, the new studies note, contains compounds that have powerful antiviral benefits, especially effective against human herpes viruses and adenoviruses, which cause the common cold. *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* prevents these viruses from replicating. Other recent studies demonstrate that extracts from the flower, stem, leaf, fruit, root, and seed of *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* are also effective against wheezing, bronchitis, malarial infection, tuberculosis, other bacteria, fungi, and some parasites.' (Counter, 2006)

20 The common names of *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* include Barbados flower-fence, pride of Barbados, peacock flower, ayoowiri, and dwarf poinciana.

21 See for example, Chiang et al, 2003 and Promsawan et al, 2003.

2.4 Henry Smeathman

Henry Smeathman (1742–1786) was a businessman and private tutor with a love of natural history. He therefore met other natural historians such as Dru Drury, Daniel Solander, Joseph Banks and John Fothergill (see section 2.5) who provided the money to sponsor him to go to Sierra Leone to collect natural history specimens in 1771. He had most success collecting insects, which his sponsors used in their own collections and to sell. Henry Smeathman also hoped to collect duplicate sets to sell at a profit for himself.

Dru Drury wrote to the Duchess of Portland, another of Henry Smeathman's sponsors, that:

> 'I have purposely deferred writing till I could with certainty inform yr Grace of the State of Mr Smeathmans Collection & of what it principally consist. I am now capable in some degree of doing so having this day opened 3 large Boxes or Chests out of Eight of which the Collection consists, & found a great variety of plants Seeds & Shells. Many of the latter appear to me to be fine, some of them are new but as my judgment in that branch of natural History is but small I cannot say much on that subject. I must beg leave to inform your Grace that as I found the Chests very large, too much so for my house to permit an examination of them I hired a Room of Mr. Paterson in Essex House (with the advice of Dr Fothergill) where I purpose them to remain till disposed of among the Subscribers. I intend on Saturday to examine some more of the boxes, & by the end of next week to go thro the whole till which time if yr Graces patience can hold out you will probably see more Shells than at present I have met with.' (Drury, 1761–83, p357)

▲ Images of moth specimens collected by Henry Smeathman, Sierra Leone, 1775, published by Drury, 1782 © The Natural History Museum, London

Dozens of Henry Smeathman's specimens ended up in Dru Drury's collecting cabinets and were illustrated in Drury's three volumes of Illustrations of Natural History (1770–82).

Henry Smeathman lived and worked with Africans and had African assistance in excavating termite mounds[22]. He acknowledged this in a paper to the Royal Society in 1781:

> 'To these obstacles must be added the obstinacy of the soldiers, who fight to the very last, disputing every inch of ground so well as often to drive away the negroes who are without shoes, and make white people bleed plentifully through their stockings.' (Smeathman, 1781, p50)

22 See also Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge.

▲ African who helped excavate termite mounds, Smeathman, 1781

Henry Smeathman stayed in Africa until 1775. Although he was initially against slavery, he took three African wives and, living among African and European traders, became less opposed to the slave trade. After leaving Sierra Leone, Smeathman spent four years in the British West Indies helping sugar planters to get rid of ant infestations.

Henry Smeathman later decided to return to Africa. Although at one time he said Sierra Leone was not even suitable as a penal colony, he later wrote of it as having:

> '... pleasant scenes of vernal beauty, a tropical luxuriance, where fruit and flowers lavish their fragrance together on the same bough'. (Smeathman, quoted in Braidwood, 1994, p7)

He suggested a plantation settlement in Sierra Leone but, unlike the Caribbean, with a free labour market particularly made up of emancipated (freed) enslaved people who fought for Britain in the American War of Independence and other Africans in Britain. There were about 5,000 Africans in London in the 1780s, and maybe 10,000 across England[23].

> 'Nothing is wanted but encouragement, to procure great quantities of cotton, as fine as the E. Indian, and tobacco as the Brazilian; also sugar and a species of indigo infinitely superior to that of the west.' (Smeathman, quoted in Braidwood, 1994, p9).

The English Anti-Slavery Committee took up the idea of a perfect settlement, with a mixture of European and African settlers, in Sierra Leone[24], and the government promised ships and supplies. Henry Smeathman volunteered to lead the expedition but he died of fever in 1786 before he could set sail for Africa[25].

23 See for example www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.18065#Past.
24 Many Africans who were repatriated to Sierra Leone came from other parts of west Africa, leading to a mix of languages and identities.
25 See also Chapter 7: Fevers.

Sierra Leone was still a major slave-trading area. The British government had to guarantee people would not be sold back into enslavement, and they also provided guns for self-defence.

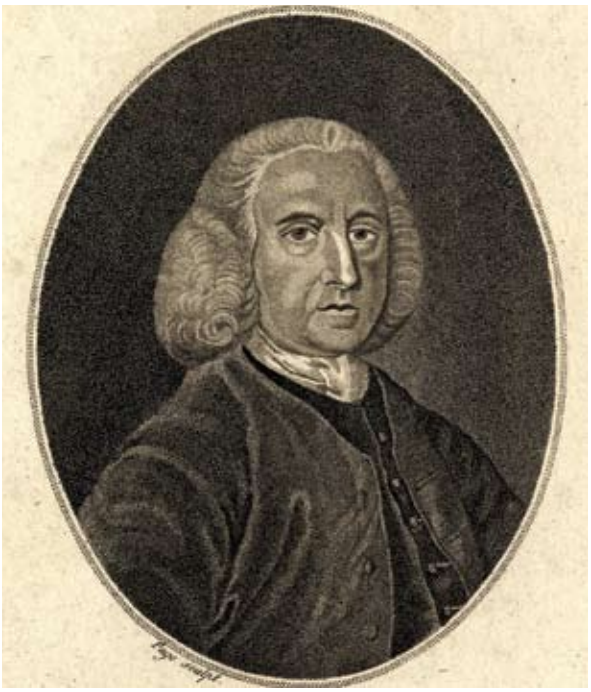
The plan got under way in 1787, supported by the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor and the Anti-Slavery Committee, with the abolitionist Olaudah Equiano as the supervisor of stores and supplies (although he was later sacked). The utopia, though, did not live up to its promise, and two and a half years later the settlement was evacuated. It did, however, form the basis for Britain's subsequent colonisation of Sierra Leone.

2.5 Other European natural historians

Other important British natural historians and collectors included James Petiver, Dru Drury, Sarah Bowdich, Mark Catesby, Martin Lister (for whom Hans Sloane collected shells), Daniel Solander (who was trained by Linnaeus) and the Quakers Peter Collinson and Dr John Fothergill (who were against slavery[26]).

James Petiver was an English apothecary and had many plants and insects collected for him from around the world, but especially from the Caribbean and Americas. His plant specimens alone filled more than 100 bound volumes. As well as building up his 'Museum Petiverianum', he sold duplicates of rare specimens in his collection and 'complete sets' of certain species. Hans Sloane was a friend of James Petiver and bought his collections after his death in 1718. James Petiver's collection is therefore now in the Natural History Museum and his private papers are in the British Library.

▲ Daniel Solander, 1784,
Picture Library reference 42856
© The Natural History Museum, London



▲ Peter Collinson (1694–1768),
Picture Library reference 52076
© The Natural History Museum, London

26 See Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgement.

Dru Drury (1725–1804) was a London silversmith who, like James Petiver, became famous for his natural history collecting. In the 1760s and 70s he gave overseas travellers (captains and surgeons on slaving ships and plantation holders in the Caribbean and Americas) boxes and equipment to fill with exotic species from around the globe, especially insects[27]. Dru Drury published three volumes of his *Illustrations of Natural History* (1770–82), describing and illustrating insects collected mainly by Henry Smeathman (see above). He stored his specimens in high quality mahogany cabinets.

Dru Drury wrote to Henry Smeathman:

> 'I am so anxious to hear from you that I most heartily curse the avarice of the merchants for carrying their Ships such an enormous way round as the West Indies & not sending them directly to Europe.' (Drury, 1761–83, p242)

In one of his many letters, Dru Drury wrote to a surgeon on a slaving ship asking him to collect natural history specimens:

> 'There is an Insect found in the West Indias that gives an extraordinary Light in the night time. If you can favour me with any of these I shall be much obligd to you, also at Jamaica I will beg you to enquire among the Negroes that work in the Woods after an Animal that lives on high trees 'tis calld the croaking Toad & makes a noise that may be heard (they say) a mile, 'tis about 3 times as big as our Toad in England, the belly is yellow spotted with brown spots & the back is very rough & exactly like the bark & colour of a Tree, if you can procure me 2 or 3 I shall be extreamly glad, they are very difficult to be seen & their eyes sparkle I am told like diamonds, but now & then the Negros catch them… ' (Drury, 1761–83, p12–3)

Sarah Bowdich (née Wallis; afterwards Lee, 1791–1856) was an English author, artist, taxidermist and naturalist who travelled to Cape Coast Castle (in Ghana) in 1816 to join her husband, Edward Bowdich, who worked for the Royal African Company. She was in Ghana for eighteen months, collecting and drawing the local plants and animals. In 1820 she wrote and illustrated a taxidermy manual to show travellers how to preserve specimens for museum collections.

Edward Bowdich died in 1824. Sarah used natural history as a career to support herself and three children. She described the loss of her plant specimens leaving the Gambia (as well as the loss of her husband):

27 See Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge.

'My Botanical List is much less complete than I had expected it would be. I took great pains to make it so, but the one fatal event which blighted all my other hopes [the death of her husband], in a great measure frustrated even these endeavours, added to which, the disastrous circumstances of my last voyage bereft me of the aid I had expected to find in Europe. Immediately after the rains cease between the tropics, vegetation is in its full vigour, but a great portion of it is so fugacious, that a fortnight will deprive the botanist of many beautiful and delicate plants. Unfortunately, we did not reach Bathurst till the end of November, two months after the rains had terminated. Many faded and broken specimens were brought to me, of which I took notes, hoping, at Mr. Bowdich's second visit, to procure, not only the perfect plants, but those which we had missed by our late arrival. I preserved a numerous collection as vouchers for my veracity, and, disappointed in all other respects, was returning with a splendid herbarium, carefully packed in a case which seemed impenetrable. The vessel in which I returned was so overladen, and consequently, so deep in the water, that, as we had a succession of storms, from the moment we made the Azores till we reached Dover, her deck was incessantly afloat; the water penetrated, and most of my property was destroyed. ... I was fearful that much destruction had taken place, but, when I went to the docks, to select the articles liable to duty, I can scarcely describe my mortification, at seeing many of my valuable books, maps, and engravings, but above all, my dried plants, drop at my feet in atoms. I was thus disabled from comparing my herbarium with the magnificent collections of England and France, all I can now do with my new, or imperfect genera, is to offer them as notes for any future traveller.' (Bowdich, 1825, p266)

Sarah Bowdich wrote a huge range of publications on natural history. Her masterpiece is considered to be *The Fresh Water Fishes of Great Britain*, 1828–37. She was the first woman to discover and systematically describe new species of plants and fish[28]. She also wrote fiction books for children and adults. In 1854 her services to natural history were recognised when she was awarded a government pension of £50 a year.

Mark Catesby (1682–1749) spent some years in the English colonies of Virginia and Carolina in America. He compiled the first comprehensive survey of the flora and fauna of British controlled areas in southeast North America. He collected many plants and sent a lot of specimens back to Hans Sloane (who included the plants in his herbarium). Mark Catesby also travelled to the Caribbean, visiting Jamaica in 1714 and the Bahama Islands in 1725. His book, *Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*, was published in parts between 1729 and 1747 and comprised 220 illustrations and accompanying descriptions of plants and animals.

28 See, for example, www.ansp.org/museum/digital_collections/fish/bowdich.php.

3. Case studies: Africans

Many enslaved Africans are unnamed and remain in the records as statistics rather than individuals. Kwasi, Joanna and Tomba are all unusual because their names are known as well as a little more detail about them[29].

3.1 Kwasi

Kwasi (also known as Kwasimukamba or Gramman Quacy) was transported from the coast of Guinea to Suriname (Dutch Guiana) in South America as a child or young adult. He was skilled in *obeah* (medical-spiritual knowledge) and may have used this as a form of power over other enslaved Africans. Kwasi also treated Europeans for medical problems. He earned a considerable amount of money from his medicines as well as by helping the Dutch to capture escaped Maroons.

Different sources represent Kwasi in different lights. John Gabriel Stedman (a Scottish-Dutch mercenary who joined a Dutch force in 1772 to hunt down freedom fighters in Suriname) presented Kwasi as respected by the enslaved as well as by Europeans[30]. After meeting Kwasi in 1777, John Gabriel Stedman wrote:

'Having been waited on by a number of planters and others with congratulations on our success against the rebels; amongst the rest appeared the celebrated *Gramman Quacy*, who came to shew me his fine coat, gold medal, &c. which he had received as a present from the Prince of Orange, in Holland. This man, being one of the most extraordinary characters of all the negroes in Surinam, or perhaps in the world, I cannot proceed without giving some account of him; the more so, as he has made his appearance once or twice already in the course of this history.—This African (for he was born on the coast of Guinea) by his insinuating temper and industry, not only obtained his freedom from a state of slavery, but by his wonderful ingenuity and artful conduct found the means of procuring a very competent subsistence.

Having got the name of a *lockoman*, or sorcerer, among the lower slaves, no crime of any consequence was committed, especially at the plantations, but *Gramman Quacy*, which signifies Great-man Quacy, was instantly sent for to discover the perpetrators, which he so very seldom missed, owing, in fact, to their faith in his sorceries, added to his penetrating look and authority among them, that he has often prevented farther mischief to their masters; and, for these services, occasionally received very capital rewards. The corps of rangers, and all fighting free negroes, are under his influence; to whom he sells his *obias* or *amulets*, in order to make them invulnerable, and, of course, to engage [in battle] without fear: by which deceit he has most certainly done much good to the colony, and at the same time filled his pockets with no inconsiderable profit to himself; while his person by the blacks is adored and respected like a God. The trash of which his amulets are made costs him in reality nothing; being neither more nor less than a collection of small pebbles, sea-shells, cut hair, fish-bones, feathers, &c. the whole sewed up with a string of cotton round the neck, or some other part of the bodies of his credulous votaries.' (Stedman, vol 2, 1806, p359)

29 See also Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgement.
30 See also Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgement.

John Gabriel Stedman's description of Kwasi focused on what Europeans knew about him. The Dutch in Suriname certainly welcomed Kwasi's help in defeating Maroon rebellions. Kwasi was given a golden breastplate by the Suriname Council, engraved 'Quassie, faithful to the whites'. He was also 'promoted' to personal slave to the governor and later given his freedom (manumission).

Anthropologists Richard and Sally Price[31] worked amongst the Saramakas, one of several distinct Maroon communities (descendants of enslaved people who had escaped and fought for wider freedom), in Suriname from the 1960s to 90s. Saramakas remember Kwasi in their oral history as a traitor, who gained medical knowledge from them, then led European soldiers into the forests to capture them.

'Kwasi was born in West Africa ca. 1690 and enslaved and transported to Suriname as a child. By 1730, he had discovered the medicinal properties of the tree that Linnaeus named in his honor Quassia amara (called in Suriname 'Quassiehout' or 'Kwasi-bita'); and during the next six decades, amidst his many other activities, Kwasi served as the colony's leading dresiman (curer) and lukuman (diviner), with vast influence not only among blacks and Indians but also among European colonists. Kwasi's fame among Europeans was not, however, based solely on his medical talents; for more than forty years he was the colony's principal intermediary in dealing with maroons, serving first as a scout, then as a negotiator, and finally as spiritual and tactical adviser of the Rangers... Saramaka Maroons today preserve rich and powerful memories of this same man (whom they call *Kwasímukámba*), who came to live with them as a spy in the mid-1750s, escaped back to the whites, led a giant military expedition against them and, ultimately, had his right ear cut off by the Saramaka chief.' (Price, eds, 1988, p666)

Saramakas give Kwasi a much longer name, Kwasimukamba of Tjedu. Richard and Sally Price suggested that Tjedu was the name of Kwasi's father's clan in Africa.

Kwasi revealed to Europeans his knowledge of a South American root said to be good for strengthening the stomach, restoring appetite and reducing fever. But Kwasi did not say which plant it came from or how he made his remedies from it. Thirty years later he finally showed the plant to a Swedish soldier Carl Gustaf Dahlberg. Dahlberg took the plant home to Carl Linnaeus in Sweden and he named it *Quassia amara* in honour of Kwasi[32].

31 The Prices' work is summarised in Parrish, 2006, p1–4.

32 See Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgement for more information on the naming of Quassia amara. Images of the samples of Quassia amara sent to Linnaeus can be seen at: www.linnaeus.nrm.se/botany/fbo/q/quass/quasama.html.en and at www.linnean-online.org.

'But besides these, and many other artful contrivances, he had the good fortune, in 1730, to find out the valuable root known by the name of *Quaciae bitter*, of which he was actually the first discoverer, and from which it took its name: and, notwithstanding this medicine is now less in repute in England than formerly, it is highly esteemed in many other parts of the world for its efficacy in strengthening the stomach and restoring the appetite. It has, besides this valuable property, that of being a powerful *febrifuge*, and may be successfully used when the bark is nauseated, as is frequently the case. In 1761, it was made known to *Linnaeus* by Mr. *d'Ahlberg*, formerly mentioned; and the Swedish naturalist has since written a treatise upon it. By this drug alone Quacy might have amassed riches, were he not entirely abandoned to indolence and dissipation; the consequence of which is, a complication of loathsome distempers, of which leprosy is one: and that disorder is, as I have already stated, absolutely incurable. Nevertheless his age, though he could not exactly ascertain it, must have been very great, since he used frequently to repeat that he acted as drummer, and beat the alarm on his master's estate, when the French commodore, *Jacques Cassard*, put the colony under contribution, in the year 1712.' (Stedman, vol 2, 1806, p359–61)

After Linnaeus had publicised the plant's medicinal benefits, it became a major export from Suriname.

In 1776, when he was about 80, the 'celebrated Gramman Quacy' was sent to The Hague to visit Willem V, Prince of Orange.

▲ *Quassia amara*, a decorative ceiling panel from the roof of the Natural History Museum's Central Hall, Picture Library reference 48863
© The Natural History Museum, Londonn

▲ The celebrated Graman Quacy', engraving by William Blake, Stedman, 1806
© The Natural History Museum, London

'Suffice it for the present to say, that the Prince of Orange, besides paying his out and homeward passage, and giving him several presents, sent him back to Surinam dressed in a suit of blue and scarlet, trimmed over with broad gold lace: on his hat he wore a white feather, and looked upon the whole not unlike one of the Dutch generals... ' (Stedman, vol 2, 1806, p313)

By the end of his life, Kwasi had his own enslaved workers.

'In due course, Kwasi became a planter in his own right and, in 1776, as Stedman reports, in recognition of his many services to the colony the governor sent him all the way to The Hague, to be received by Willem V, Prince of Orange, who fêted him with gifts. After his triumphant return to Suriname, Kwasi remained active on behalf of the colonists into his nineties, while he lived in a fine house in Paramaribo, given him for his use free of charge by the government.' (Price, eds, 1988, p666)

Kwasi is a controversial figure. He can be seen as using his skills to work his way out of slavery, by co-operating with Europeans and helping them capture enslaved Africans who escaped. On the other hand he can be seen as driven by self-interest and betrayal – his knowledge was almost certainly borrowed and/or stolen from other African and indigenous American healers[33]. There were probably more people like Kwasi, but they were not acknowledged or recorded by the Europeans.

3.2 Joanna

Joanna was the daughter of an enslaved African woman called Cery and a Dutchman, named Kruythoff. Cery was owned by another man, but local custom allowed her to live with Kruythoff as his wife and she gave birth to five of his children. Joanna was the first. John Gabriel Stedman (see above) met Joanna in Suriname (Dutch Guiana), South America, in 1773, when she was about 15 and he was 30. John Gabriel Stedman wrote about Joanna and his concerns for her[34]:

'I shall now proceed... to present to the reader... a description of the beautiful mulatto maid Joanna... When reflecting on the state of slavery altogether, while my ears were stunned with the clang of the whip, and the dismal yells of the wretched negroes on whom it was exercised, from morning till night; and considering that this might one day be the fate of the unfortunate mulatto I have been describing, should she chance to fall into the hands of a tyrannical master or mistress...' (Stedman, vol 1,1806, p93–7)

33 See also Schiebinger, 2004, p213.

34 A good summary of Stedman's writings on Joanna is at: docsouth.unc.edu/neh/stedman/menu.html, however it is based on a later – 1838 – publication of Stedman's work which had been heavily edited and focus only on extracts referring to Joanna. The images are also different and Joanna is shown with her breast covered.

John Gabriel Stedman was clearly impressed by Joanna's beauty:

'... she was possessed of the most elegant shape that nature can exhibit. Her face was full of native modesty, and the most distinguished sweetness; her eyes, as black as ebony, were large and full of expression, bespeaking the goodness of her heart; with cheeks through which glowed, in spite of the darkness of her complexion, a beautiful tinge of vermillion when gazed upon. Her nose was perfectly well formed, rather small; her lips a little prominent, which, when she spoke, discovered two regular rows of teeth, as white as mountain snow; ... so much distinguished above all others of her species in the colony'. (Stedman, vol 1,1806, p93–7)

On 8 May 1773 Joanna and Stedman celebrated a Suriname marriage. This was a commercial arrangement where a price was agreed with the mother but the relationship ended when men left the colony. The custom was not recognised by the law or the Church.

Women like Joanna, born of African and European parents, were thought to be good at nursing and healing. Although Joanna was born in Suriname to a Dutch father, she had direct contact with African traditions through her mother and grandfather who John Gabriel Stedman reports were held in high status in their community.

'Here Joanna introduced me to a venerable old slave, her grandfather, who made me a present of half a dozen fowls. He was grey-headed and blind, but had been comfortably supported for many years through the kind attention of his numerous offspring. He told me he was born in Africa, where he had once been more respected than any of his Surinam masters ever were in their country.' (Stedman, vol 1, 1806, p319)

▲Joanna, Stedman, 1806
© The Natural History Museum, London[35]

Joanna also had connections to the Maroons. Jolycoeur (or Jolly Coeur), a Maroon leader, protected Cery, Joanna's mother, and her children[36]. John Gabriel Stedman blamed the cruelty of the plantation holder, Mr D B, for encouraging enslaved Africans to escape:

35 Stedman wrote that enslaved Africans and 'Mulattoes' (dual descent European/African), both male and female, did not wear clothing above the waist in Suriname. The wrap across Joanna's breast may have been an attempt to ignore the customs and cover herself more to suggest status.

36 See also Chapter 6: Resistance for more information on Jolly Coeur.

'Mr D. B., however, met with his just reward: for having since driven all his best carpenter negroes to the woods by his injustice and severity, he was ruined, and obliged to fly the colony, and leave his estate and stock to the disposal of his creditors; while one of the above unhappy deserters, a samboe, has by his industry been the protector of Cery and her children. His name is Jolycoeur, and he is now the first of Baron's captains, whom you may have a chance of meeting in the rebel camp, breathing revenge against the Christians.' (Stedman, vol 1,1806, p95–6)

Joanna had many relatives living both in slavery as well as in freedom. John Gabriel Stedman described her uncle, Cojo, who initially fought against the rebels until the cruelty he experienced forced him to join them:

'Joanna arrived, accompanied by a stout black, who was her uncle, and whose arm was decorated with a silver band, on which were engraved these words: 'True to the Europeans.' This man, who was named Cojo, having voluntarily fought against the rebels, before his companions, by the inhuman treatment of Mr. D. B. and his overseer, had been forced to join them.' (Stedman, vol 1, 1806, p348)

Her knowledge and skills would have included African healing and herbal remedies. John Gabriel Stedman was grateful that she cured him of different illnesses on several occasions:

'I was seized suddenly with a dreadful fever; and such was its violence, that in a few days I was no more expected to recover... had it not been for the happy intervention of poor Joanna, who... by her unremitting care and attention had the good fortune so far to regain my health and spirits...' (Stedman, vol 1,1806, p110–11)

He was convinced that Joanna saved his life:

'... the surgeon, having... finally declared that I was dead,... when a grave and coffin were prepared for my burial on the 17th, which she had prevented by dropping upon her knees to implore a delay; that she had dispatched a black to her aunt at Fauconberg for wine-vinegar, and a bottle of old Rhenish, with the first of which she had constantly bathed my temples, wrists, and feet, by keeping without intermission five wet handkerchiefs tied around them; while, with a tea-spoon, she had found means to make me swallow a few drops of the wine mulled... while she had day and night, by the help of Quaco and an old negro, attended me... I had, however, the good fortune to recover; but so slowly that, notwithstanding the great care that was taken of me by that excellent young woman, (to whom alone I owed my life) it was the 15th of June before I could walk by myself, during all which time I was carried on a species of chair by two negroes, supported on two poles like a sedan, and fed like an infant, being so lame and enervated that I was not able to bring my hand to my mouth; while poor Joanna (who had suffered too much on my account) was for several days following very ill herself'. (Stedman, vol 2, 1806, p356–8)

Joanna also helped Stedman when he was infected with chigoe, a kind of small sand flea. It buried under his skin and laid eggs. The eggs hatched and the young chigoes under his skin created ulcers. Joanna carefully picked them out with a needle[37].

Stedman returned to Holland in 1776, but Joanna, aged 19, and their baby son, Johnny, stayed in Suriname. Before he left, Stedman bought Johnny's freedom and although Joanna was still enslaved, he arranged for her to have a new owner, Mrs Godefroy, who said that she would treat her as a friend.

Joanna died in November 1782. Stedman was told she had been poisoned (as had her freed brother Henry). Johnny was sent to Stedman with £200, the value of Joanna's estate, which included an enslaved woman of African ancestry. Stedman sent Johnny to Blundell's school in Devon, England, before he joined the Royal Navy. Johnny died at sea in the early 1790s.

3.3 Tomba

From written sources some background information on Tomba can be pieced together[38]. Tomba was born in west Africa in around 1700. His adopted father was a general of the Jalonke-speaking people, who was defeated in battle and the fight against slavery and fled to the forest. Tomba then raided passing slave caravans for food and weapons. He became the ruler of the Baga people on the River Núñez in present-day Guinea Bissau. He tried unsuccessfully to prevent Europeans trading in African people, killing African middlemen and burning their houses. A few villages joined this resistance under Tomba's rule, but their efforts failed.

Tomba was captured by African traders with the help of the Europeans they supplied. He was sent to a fort on Bance Island, Sierra Leone. He was now owned by the pirate John Leadstone, commonly called Old Cracker.

▲ Map of 'Negro-Land', Ogilby, 1670 © The Natural History Museum, London

37 See also Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgement.
38 See for example the writing of a ship's surgeon, John Atkins, 1737, and the historian Hugh Thomas, 1997.

John Atkins, a surgeon on Bance Island, noticed Tomba among the captured Africans:

> 'I could not help taking notice of one fellow among the rest, of a tall, strong male, and bold, stern aspect.' (Atkins, quoted in Thomas, 1997, p392)

Tomba, who was of strong character and large build, resisted the slave traders and refused to stand up or raise his arms to be inspected for sale. This resistance:

> '... got him an unmerciful whipping from Cracker's own hand, with a cutting manatee strip [a whip made from the hide of a manatee], and had certainly killed him... all of which the negro bore with magnanimity, shrinking very little, and shedding a tear or two, which he endeavoured to hide as tho' ashamed'. (Atkins, quoted in Thomas, 1997, p392)

Other European traders were intrigued by this courage. They had heard how Tomba had resisted both Africans and European slave traders, but how he had been taken by surprise one night and captured[39].

Tomba was put on the ship *Robert of Bristol*, led by Captain Harding. Before the ship was far from land Tomba led an uprising. John Atkins wrote how the story was told to him:

> '... *Tomba*, about a Week before, had combined with three or four of the stoutest of his Country-men to kill the Ship's Company, and attempt their Escapes'. (Atkins, 1737, p72)

Tomba was nearly successful with the help of a woman:

> '... had near effected it by means of a Woman-Slave, who being more at large, was to watch the proper Opportunity'. (Atkins, 1737, p72)

The woman was able to leave the ship's hold and one night saw only five sailors sleeping on deck. She brought Tomba a hammer, the only weapon she could find.

Tomba encouraged others to join him but only one, as well as the woman, went up on deck.

> 'She brought him word one night that there were no more than five white Men upon the Deck, and they asleep, bringing with him a Hammer at the same time (all the Weapons that she could find) to execute the Treachery. He encouraged the Accomplices what he could, with the Prospect of Liberty, but could now at the Push, engage only one more and the Woman to follow him upon the Deck.' (Atkins, 1737, p72)

39 See also Chapter 6: Resistance which describes many other forms of resistance and shows that Africans were enslaved but not accepting of the system of slavery.

Tomba killed three sailors with the hammer, but the noise woke the others who alerted the ship's captain and sailors below.

'He found three Sailors sleeping on the Fore-castle, two of which he presently dispatched, with single Strokes upon the Temples; the other rousing with the Noise, his Companions seized; *Tomba* coming soon to their Assistance, and murdering him in the same manner.' (Atkins, 1737, p72)

The captain seized a handspike and knocked Tomba to the deck. The three Africans were then held with iron chains:

'... soon awaked the Master underneath them, who running up and finding his Men contending for their Lives, took a Hand-spike, the first thing he met with in the Surprize, and redoubling his Strokes home upon *Tomba*, laid him at length flat upon the Deck, securing them all in Irons'. (Atkins, 1737, p72–3)

Three enslaved Africans were killed after this uprising. But Tomba's value was high therefore he and the other man who tried to overcome the sailors were not killed but were severely whipped.

'Captain Harding weighing the Stoutness and Worth of the two Slaves, did, as in other Countries they do by Rogues of Dignity, whip and scarify them only; while three others, Abettors, not Actors, nor of Strength for it, he sentenced to cruel Deaths; making them first eat the Heart and Liver of one of them killed. The Woman he hoisted up by the Thumbs, whipp'd, and slashed her with Knives, before the other Slaves till she died.' (Atkins, 1737, p73)

Written documents did not record what happened to Tomba after he arrived in the British colonies.

Resistance on board ship was common[40]. There were reports that sharks followed slaving ships across the Atlantic to feed on the bodies of enslaved Africans who were thrown overboard as a punishment or as a result of death.

'If any Person fall over-board, he is infallibly dead, unless (which very seldom happens) none of these Fish are near, or he is immediately helped up. When dead Slaves are thrown over-board, I have sometimes, not without Horror, seen the dismal Rapaciousness of these Animals; four or five of them together shoot to the Bottom under the Ship to tear the dead Corps to pieces; at each Bite an Arm, a Leg, or the Head is snapt off; and before you can tell Twenty, they have sometimes divided the Body amongst them so nicely, that not the least Particle is left; nay, not so much as any of the Entrails... they devour Human Bodies; which, I am apt to think, relish very well, since, when our Ships depart from those Places, they sometimes follow them for three Weeks or a Month, waiting for more Slaves to be thrown over-board.' (Bosman, 1721, p264–6)

40 See for example www.understandingslavery.com/themes/?id=636&showBackgroundInfo=true.

Wider research showed that many African people had little choice but to trade people with Europeans. Africans were not passive partners in trading. They were both threatened by European guns and attracted by traded goods, including guns and ammunition, alcohol, cloth and glass. Some African leaders used opportunities at the time of the slave trade to develop their own economies[41].

Other African leaders, like Tomba, resisted European exploitation. Further examples included King Afonso I, ruler of the Kongo Kingdom (present day Angola and Congo), and Queen Nzinga of Ndongo (now Angola). Afonso protested over Portuguese trading in copper, ivory and slaves, and tried unsuccessfully to limit the number of Africans the Portuguese could enslave. The Portuguese attempted unsuccessfully to assassinate him. He was not powerful enough to expel the Portuguese who continued trading. In 1630 Queen Nzinga said ex-slaves could live freely in the Kingdom of Ndongo (now Angola). She opposed European slavers for 30 years, only signing a peace treaty with Portugal in 1657.

Even after the British slave trade had officially ended, resistance to the British presence in Africa continued. In Ghana, Yaa Asantewaa rebelled against her brother, the King, who continued to sell his own people into slavery for guns. When he died, she led a war of resistance against the colonialism of the British[42]. This was the last war in Africa led by a woman.

4. Case studies: Collectors

Information about indigenous people in Africa and in the Americas was often written by Europeans at the time of the transatlantic slave trade. There are some examples of Africans writing about their enslavement (for example, Cugoano, 1787, and Equiano, 1789). There are no examples in the materials held by the Natural History Museum that were researched for this project of the words of indigenous peoples of the Americas themselves.

4.1 Indigenous peoples of the Americas

The Americas were inhabited by a diversity of indigenous peoples long before the arrival of Europeans. Indigenous groups included the Arawaks, Tainos and Caribs. They moved between the continents of North and South America and the Caribbean islands, exchanging knowledge and plants.

The Spanish, who were one of the first European nations to colonise Central and South America, wrote about the knowledge, customs and plants used by indigenous peoples. For example, the Arawaks used tobacco for a medicine as well as for ceremonies. They cooked maize (*Zea mays*, also called Indian corn, sweetcorn or mealies) with ashes or lime. This released the niacin (vitamin B3) and prevented pellagra[43]. The success of the Inca and Aztec civilisations was partly due to their vegetarian diet of peanuts, maize, beans and squashes[44].

The arrival of Europeans had a terrible effect on the health of the indigenous people. Many of them died as a result of European diseases such as smallpox, measles, chickenpox and influenza. Indigenous people in the Americas had little or no resistance (or immunity) to these diseases[45].

41 See for example: www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/index.shtml and www.understandingslavery.com.
42 See: www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/people/pop-up.php?ID=175.
43 See also Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition.
44 See www.nhm.ac.uk/jdsml/nature-online/seeds-of-trade/.
45 See also Chapter 7: Fevers.

Europeans tried at first to use indigenous people to work for them (as well as some European indentured servants contracted on low pay). But the low numbers and high death rates of indigenous peoples meant that Europeans preferred African labour. European writers sometimes referred to 'Negroes' and 'Indians' suggesting that they were enslaved together at the same time.

Africans arriving in the Americas certainly came in contact with indigenous peoples. It appears from the records that knowledge was shared more freely between indigenous people and enslaved Africans[46] than with Europeans. There was a wide variety of European views on African and indigenous knowledge[47].Almost all natural historians relied on local guides to help them collect specimens. Some, such as Alexander von Humboldt (a German naturalist and explorer), complained that his guides in South America were only interested in trees as timber for canoes and paid no attention to their leaves:

'... like botanists of antiquity they deny what they had not taken the trouble to observe. They are tired of our questions, and have exhausted our patience in return'. (Humboldt, quoted in Schiebinger, 2004, p89).

Others, such as Edward Long, a planter in Jamaica, felt that humans had instincts to use natural plants for their survival. Although Edward Long was dismissive and domineering in his attitude to indigenous and enslaved people, he offered unintended praise when he said that:

'... brutes are botanists by instinct'. (Long, quoted in Schiebinger, 2004, p82)[49].

▲ A European being carried 'by man's back', Humboldt, 1816
© The Natural History Museum, London[48]

46 See Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge.
47 See Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgement.
48 Although Humboldt sketched this image, he rarely rode by man's back but preferred to walk, see Schiebinger, 2004, p66.
49 Schiebinger, 2004, p82 describes Edward Long's views on traditional cures as racist.

▲One of the earliest recorded examples of life in the Caribbean (French colonies) Du Tertre, 1671 © The Natural History Museum, London

Some illustrations show representations of indigenous peoples at the time of the transatlantic slave trade, although they are often romanticised.

Europeans did not generally write down the names of indigenous peoples. But the contribution indigenous people in the Americas made to the survival of enslaved African people and the science of natural history cannot be underestimated[50].

4.2 African assistance

As well as using indigenous people in the Americas, Europeans involved Africans in collecting natural history specimens. This was true in Africa and in the Americas.

Henry Smeathman (see section 2.4) had help from Africans in excavating termite mounds, in Sierra Leone.

Sarah Bowdich (see section 2.5) described the need for help in collecting specimens and paying local people for their work on the Cape Verde islands in 182351. In the Americas, Europeans also often paid enslaved Africans for help in collecting specimens and identifying the local uses[52], whereas for some enslaved people these tasks were assumed as one of their roles.

Enslaved Africans on plantations, especially those who worked as personal servants, had to take part in many activities as well as hard physical labour. Reverend William Smith, an amateur natural historian, described how an enslaved African, Oxford, dived for a sea plant on a fishing trip in Nevis:

> 'In the Month of July, 1719, [we] went to angle in Black Rock Pond... Mr. Pinheiro's Hook catched hold on something at the bottom of the Pond, and he ordered my Negro Man Oxford to strip, dive, and unloose it. Oxford went indeed to the bottom, but came again without effecting it; and said, that it was entangled in a small Bush that grew in the bottom of the Pond, which was in that place about two yards and a half deep. However, he dived again, and after a few sturdy pulls, brought up the Bush, Roots and all. Both its Roots and Branches were visibly enough alive, but without either Bark or Leaves, it being covered over with a soft blackish substance which no doubt served in the room of Bark. Upon cutting it in two, I found the Wood of a pale or faded green.' (Smith, 1745, p10–11)

50 See also Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge.
51 See Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge.
52 See for example, Petiver, 1696–9, p62 quoted in Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge.

From William Smith's writing it seems that Oxford[53] did most of the actual collecting of plants, shells and other specimens for Smith's curiosity cabinet.

Henry Barham described how he relied on an enslaved African's skill in a storm in Jamaica:

> '... I was once in the woods, and was caught in a great shower of rain, having only an old Congo negro with me, who made me a hut; and I, having heard that some negroes could make fire, as they called it, I asked him if he could do it; he said, yes, and went and got a dry piece of this tree, and split it, making a little hole or dent in it with the point of his knife; he then took a smaller piece of harder wood, and made the end of it to fit that dent; then he sat down, and held the flat piece between his feet, and with the upright piece, which centred in the hollow of the other, twirled it round very swift between the two palms of his hands; it began to smoke in a very little time, and fire appeared, which he so managed that we had soon a very good fire'. (Barham, 1794, p195–6)

It is very likely that many more unknown and unnamed enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples in the Americas used their knowledge and skills to enable Europeans to collect natural history specimens and therefore contributed to the development of European science[54].

53 From Smith's writing it seems Oxford was born in Africa, perhaps an Akan-speaker from modern-day Ghana. He was probably transported to the Americas as a young adult. Smith may have named Oxford after the university where he was educated. Enslaved Africans were not supposed to be educated.

54 See also Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge.

5. Alternative interpretations

This chapter presents research information and context. The evidence itself can be seen in different ways and raises many questions and some further areas for research. Through the Natural History Museum's slavery and the natural world public programme many alternative interpretations and questions relevant to this chapter have been collected and some of these are summarised below:

- Were the natural historians of the day exploiting the system of slavery?
- Were enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples in the Americas scientists?

Exchange between people

The range of people associated with the transatlantic slave trade raised a lively debate about different contributions to collecting and the development of the science of natural history.

'I am sure that slaves and indigenous people helped out there and collecting... before slavery and after. Whether to find a particular fish, they may not have called it by the correct scientific name but they may have called it by a common name and I'm sure that there is something that we can do there.'

'I am just fascinated by the rich source of specimens that we have now, you know behind the scenes I guess that can be attributed to the indigenous people who collected those specimens. I know not all the specimens but a lot of them.'

Recognition of the contribution of indigenous peoples in the Americas was needed:
We were talking on that table about how things were exchanged between the Africans and the Native Americans.'

'Let us say what is due to Native Americans because it is clear that they passed on the North American, South American islands' information about natural resources to Africans as well as Europeans.'

It was felt that knowledge transfer was two-way to an extent as indigenous people in the Americas and enslaved Africans needed 'to be taught how to collect'.

Most importantly, it was felt that: 'This above all is a validation of how African people despite the most adverse conditions in which they have found themselves in history have stuck to their own ways of learning and that has been their salvation throughout.'

A question was raised as to why 'a lot of the specimens come from Jamaica in this example – is there any particular reason for that?' One reason for this was that Hans Sloane, and several other natural historians, spent their time in Jamaica. But it was pointed out that, 'I come from a smaller island – Barbados – I do think it is important to get the whole picture of the Caribbean. I think many people whenever they think of black think of Jamaica... so it might be worth trying to find out some examples which go out to some of the smaller islands as well'.

Hans Sloane

Hans Sloane was seen as a 'man of his time'. His commercial and humanitarian instincts were recognised. 'He had observed a woman give cocoa drink to her child. He wanted to do business with Quakers. And even getting money for his collection – it was business.'

Kwasi

The discussions raised the question:

- What do you think of Kwasi? Was he an entrepreneur who worked the system or a traitor?

People thought that he was:

- Very intelligent and knew what he was doing
- An entrepreneurial guy who made his money
- An opportunist

One participant said:

'He must have been quite brave really, because it was such a dangerous game he was playing. Holding on to the medicine for example and not letting other people know so that he could make some profit out of it or being a spy or a double agent – it must have been quite dangerous.'

Joanna

The discussions raised many questions about Joanna and her relationship with John Gabriel Stedman.

- Do you think Joanna was a victim of sexual exploitation, or was she taking some control over her destiny? What might have made her stay in Suriname when Stedman returned to Holland?
- Did Joanna learn her nursing skills from traditional remedies she would have had access to via her grandfather and the Maroons?
- Would it be a better life to marry Stedman or to work on the field?
- Was it an equal relationship?

It was felt that people have ways of placing themselves in society where they would have been of most use, and Joanna could have been one of these people. She had power with her beauty.

John Gabriel Stedman was seen as 'a bounty hunter', and he was 'picking the best of the group'. It was said that: 'He is white so he can do anything; she has no choice.'

People felt that:

- It's not a partnership between Stedman and Joanna. It's another slave that Stedman got.
- The marriage doesn't sound very equitable. It's like a sex trade.
- The man is a rapist/abuser.
- It was not romanticised – women were seen to be raped/as objects.

The Suriname marriage between Joanna and John Gabriel Stedman was seen as a form of resistance:

'It was just the notion of covert rather than the resistance because just the term resistance to my mind just makes me think of voicing out and breaking out of chains in a very physical sense but with the example of the arranged marriage, we were talking about the idea of French resistance type party and the information through the arranged marriage and the kind of covert resistance was quite an interesting idea.'

There was some discussion why she did not return to Holland with him. The participants in the discussions speculated that it was because:

- Family ties kept her
- She wouldn't know what freedom meant
- She had status in Suriname

'Joanna didn't go because she knew people and the surroundings in Surinam and going to Holland was scary.' The idea that Stedman might have organised her death was also discussed.

Tomba

The uprising led by Tomba raised as many questions as answers.

- Why was Tomba kept? Was Tomba's status something to do with his relatively small punishment?
- Who is being punished?
- Do we know more about Tomba when he arrived in the Americas?

The 'others were punished as an example'. The fact that they were made to eat each other was seen as 'psychopathic'. One person said that, 'making people eat each other was like making you use your own tactic against them'. Perhaps, as one participant said, in Tomba's case, the 'greatest form of punishment was to be kept alive'.

The role of Tomba's woman accomplice was interesting, and it was said that most 'people think women would not cause trouble'.

- How did Tomba and the woman become allies?
- Why was the woman on deck – was she sexually abused or cooking?

It was noted that 'women and children were on deck therefore easy to rape or abuse'. Participants also pointed out that 'many enslaved people were thrown overboard'. It was a punishment for some enslaved Africans who took part in uprisings onboard ship, but sick or weak Africans were also thrown overboard.

Another participant responded that 'there was always insurance and we knew very well from records that many enslaved Africans were thrown overboard just purely to get insurance which was actually worth more than taking the enslaved Africans'.

The discussions raised both specific and general questions; people asked:

- Was Sierra Leone one of the points where the slaves left for plantations?
- It's brutality to enslaved Africans. Why was it so brutal? I think, on ships, there's always brutal life
- We are celebrating the end of buying and selling slaves but the slaves continued to be held in slavery and this continued to be permitted until 1834. Is this a correct description of what happened?

6. Additional references

There is a full list of references, including all of the research documents, in Chapter 1: The project. These references offer additional reading specifically relating to this chapter.

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55 These papers are located in the British Library, Sloane Mss. 2302, 3333, 3334.