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## Working with local communities to enhance the understanding and interpretation of natural history collections: lessons learnt from the *Rights and Rites* project

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### Abstract

This paper describes key findings of the *Rights and Rites* pilot project, which aimed to: 1) co-curate new interpretations of bio-cultural specimens from Amgueddfa Cymru's botanical collections, centering on peoples' lived-experiences and cultural understanding of the specimens' country of origin; 2) engage local community groups of Asian heritage with relevant biocultural specimens; 3) encourage dialogue and knowledge-exchange about the South Asian flora and; 4) raise awareness of the collections, to reach a wider audience. Through three interactive workshops, new connections were made with 34 members of local Welsh communities with personal and ancestral links to South Asia and others interested in South Asian culture. These workshops created space for individuals to participate in dialogue and share their knowledge about the use of plants in cooking, medicine, celebration and rituals in South Asian cultures. Selected South Asian biocultural specimens were used to initiate conversations and evoke memories connected to the specimens. Participants reported that much of the shared knowledge was based on expertise held in the community, often passed down orally through generations. Questionnaires were used to gauge the interests of the workshop participants, record their perception of Amgueddfa Cymru and to gather feedback and suggestions around the specimens and future work. Workshop findings highlight the importance of valuing expertise and lived-experience held within the local community and the necessity to work with community partners to broaden understanding and interpretation of Museum bio-cultural specimens. Questionnaires highlighted the need for more outreach and events based around collections to appeal to a more diverse audience. The project outcomes are informing the Amgueddfa Cymru strategy around decolonising biocultural collections. They highlight the need for transformations in institutional frameworks to fully support the decolonisation process, including the way outreach and engagement is valued and enabled, and how an ethics of care is central to this work.

**Keywords:** Decolonisation; Economic Botany Collections; interactive workshops; Outreach; digitisation; South Asia, spices.



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## Introduction

This paper describes *Rights and Rites*, a small participatory project that focusses on providing cultural context for collections of botanical specimens held by Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales. *Rights and Rites* is part of a larger programme of decolonisation of the Museum's collections. The Amgueddfa Cymru decolonisation programme aims to address links with slavery and colonialism, improve transparency, make the Museum more welcoming to all sections of the community and, improve the representation of the collections. The priorities of the programme include: defining decolonisation; improving community access to and engagement with collections; developing multiple perspectives to support understanding; developing relationships that value community expertise, and; using this to inform future uses of collections (Amgueddfa Cymru, 2022). In response to the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) Wales and duty of well-being placed upon the Museum as a public body, Amgueddfa Cymru uses a cultural rights-based approach within the decolonisation programme, focusing on building cultural democracy and community agency (Lane and Williams, 2020; Nicol and Pardoe, 2022).

One widely accepted definition by Carissa Chew (2023) defines decolonisation as “a restorative justice movement that seeks to dismantle the systems, institutions, and ideologies of colonialism that still serve to perpetuate inequalities today”. Decolonisation can be understood as a slow, evolving process where existing practices are taken apart, reflection is a part of the process, and actions are continually improved upon (Minott, 2019). In this work, decolonisation is continually aspired towards rather than considered as a final state (Gopal, 2021). From a museological perspective, decolonisation has become an umbrella term meaning different things to different people; both recognising and rectifying issues in the past; recognising and promoting expertise held in the community; changing Museum practices; and realising restorative justice. The Amgueddfa Cymru decolonisation programme and *Rights and Rites* project seek to encompass elements of all these approaches.

Following an audit of the collections to identify specimens with links to colonialism, curators of the botany collections recognised that over 1,000 specimens from South Asia lack cultural context. Relatively little was known about these specimens, in some cases, just the nation where they were derived, scientific name and collection details. The *Rights and Rites* project was designed to address these issues and was informed by the Museum's

decolonisation programme. The Museum had already received a substantial Capability for Collections Fund (CapCo) grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to purchase new photographic and scanning equipment. *Rights and Rites* was awarded an AHRC CapCo follow-on grant (April – December 2022). The research strategy of the project was to use the new equipment to make the South Asian specimens accessible to a wider audience and to improve interpretation and documentation of the specimens. The research team identified the vibrant and diverse community of South Asian heritage in Cardiff and surroundings, who represent 10% of Cardiff's residents (Office of National Statistics, 2023), as providing an opportunity to develop new partnerships, to work together to co-curate specimens, to share expertise, as well as to raise awareness of the collections held by Amgueddfa Cymru.

In light of the need to acknowledge our positionality and situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) as a research team, here we present the various roles of the research team. The *Rights and Rites* project team is made up of people with diverse cultural backgrounds. Heather Pardoe has English and Irish heritage. She has lived most of her adult life in Wales, with 33 years experience as a botany curator and researcher. Her role was to lead and co-ordinate the project. Nathan Kitto has Welsh heritage. His primary role was to digitise specimens, to add information to the Botany electronic database and to convey the technical aspects of the project. Fiona Roberts has mixed Singaporean-South Asian, English and Welsh heritage. She is currently undertaking a PhD focused on the Economic Botany collection at Amgueddfa Cymru (a collaborative doctoral project between the Museum and the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University). She contributed to data analysis and reviewing literature, attending the workshops as a participant-observer. Poppy Nicol is an early career researcher and grower with Welsh heritage. They have a research interest in participatory approaches and biocultural diversity. They contributed to the methodological framework and workshop format and led on workshop data analysis. Jessica Dunrod is a Welsh and St. Kittian woman. She was Project Manager for Decolonising Collections at Amgueddfa Cymru from March 2022 until she resigned in August 2023 due to internal grievances, an indication of the challenges the decolonisation process faces in institutions such as national museums (Wightwick, 2023).

## Literature review

### *Defining and enacting decolonisation processes in a museum context*

There is currently no consensus on decolonisation's definition in the museum sector (Giblin *et al.*, 2019). This is partly due to the far-reaching and changeable legacies of colonialism - decolonisation varies in different contexts, requiring a definition open-ended enough to be applicable to different museums, while also refined enough for individual contexts to differentiate the process from wider work of race and representation (Gopal, 2021; Seppälä *et al.*, 2021; McCarthy and Tamarapa, 2022). The Decolonisation Charter at Amgueddfa Cymru (2022) highlights the difficulty in defining the term, instead foregrounding the practice of creating an emergent definition that is continuously and iteratively developed throughout the research process. Critiques of decolonisation-in-practice suggests the term is sometimes used as a synonym for wider justice work, which could be better conceptualised as anti-racism or outreach work (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Gopal, 2021).

The Amgueddfa Cymru Decolonisation Charter emphasises the complex and lengthy process of decolonisation, aiming to evolve understanding gradually through exploration with community partners (Amgueddfa Cymru, 2022). This approach highlights how the complexity of decolonisation processes requires space, money and time for reflection (Kassim, 2017; Minott, 2019; Gopal, 2021). However, it is important to consider that museums may be so deeply embedded in colonial power structures, that decoloniality may only be co-opted by them (Kassim, 2017). Azoulay (2020) suggests, "it is not possible to decolonize the museum without decolonizing the world". Others argue that while it may not be possible to decolonise museums and other institutions independently of society and economy, they can, however, be a place for these questions to be addressed, aiming at wider change (Gopal, 2021).

Despite these difficulties in defining the term and critiques of practice, museological and wider research suggests decolonial approaches can work on decentring colonial knowledge systems embedded in museum collections, reimagining histories to centre multiple, non-Eurocentric voices and developing alternative forms of engagement, while importantly thinking reflexively about the frictions invoked in these processes to build understanding (Yawda, 2019; Seppälä *et al.*, 2021). This work focuses on all areas of the museum, from recruitment, labelling and audience engagement, to repatriation, acquisitions and

architecture. It can include new exhibition narratives, website content and publications, as well as different hiring policies and engagement activities (Giblin *et al.*, 2019; Ashby, 2021; Ariese and Wróblewska, 2021).

Further research on community outreach highlights the importance of focusing on sharing expertise and connecting with the needs of communities (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Seppälä *et al.*, 2021). Critically, it is important to create long-term strategies within decolonisation approaches so that the knowledge acquired, and relationships developed through engaging with communities are embedded into museum practice, as well as remunerating non-museum expertise properly (Minott, 2019).

In Natural History collections, decolonial approaches have developed more slowly than ethnographic collections (Martins, 2021). Emerging decolonial approaches however are focussing on exploring the troubling colonial histories of specimens, reinterpreting the silenced contributions of colonised peoples for a broader diversity of audiences – as outlined in Das and Lowe's (2018) leadership work at the Natural History Museum, London. This approach encourages museums to change potentially racist and colonial narratives to emphasise the social histories and contemporary stories of non-Western peoples, bridging the disconnect between non-white audiences and natural history collections (Das and Lowe, 2018).

Drawing upon critical decolonisation theories and participatory methodologies, museums across the globe are beginning to attempt more collaborative decolonisation processes. In the British Museum, for example, the refreshed South Asia gallery opened in 2017 and dedicated displays to the colonial and postcolonial periods of the subcontinent's history, emphasising cross-cultural exchange, transparent collecting histories and South Asian agency, setting up workshops with community groups around London to present multi-vocal views (Giblin *et al.*, 2019). In the Smithsonian Museum, community members are actively involved in curating collections (Smithsonian, 2023). Pennsylvania Museum hires and trains immigrant and refugee community members as guides, enabling diverse local community members to bring new perspectives on collections and new understandings of local community heritage (Pennsylvania Museum, 2018), the starting point of ongoing decolonisation.

*Natural History collections and connections to the impacts of colonialism on the South Asian diaspora*  
Colonial powers, including the British Empire, ruled over one-fifth of the world's population by

the early 20th century, violently extracting resources and exploiting people (Giblin *et al.*, 2019). Natural science collections were created as repositories for colonial scientific expeditions and represent Eurocentric narratives (Ashby and Machin, 2021). Botanical science was integral to imperial goals, with knowledge of nature used to exploit natural resources, transplanting plants globally and developing plantation economies (Baber, 2016; Das and Lowe, 2018).

In South Asia, colonialism had a deep impact, producing social, economic and political long-term effects. Under colonial rule, India was conceived as a sub-continent, including what is now Pakistan, Bangladesh and to an extent Sri Lanka (Zubaida, 2009). During the 1947 independence process, the British-designed Indian partition divided the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, based on religious differences. Muslims fled to the Islamic nation of Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs to secular India, leading to thousands of families being separated. Two million lives were lost between 1947 and 1948 (Mohanram, 2011). While famines were widespread before colonialism, their frequency and severity increased during British rule with around 25 major famines caused by repeated economic crises, including the 1943 Bengal famine, when around three million people perished (Mallik, 2022).

Colonialism has impacted South Asian ethnobotanical knowledge, relating to medicine, ritual and food, in multiple ways. In South Asia, these categories are highly interlinked, with Indian cooking embedded with spiritual beliefs, which in turn have health implications (Appadurai, 1988). Medicinal systems, such as Ayurveda and Unani were developed in pre-colonial rule under diverse religious affiliations such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. Whilst early British colonialists were curious about South Asian medicine, with early transmission between Western biomedicine and traditional medicinal systems, this largely diminished over time (Sujatha, 2020). Following colonial state policies and the establishment of the Western biomedical framework as the official system, these traditional medicinal systems experienced repression and neglect.

Today, South Asian indigenous medicinal knowledge has spread globally, finding new forms in diverse places, and it is important to emphasise the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of knowledge and fluid boundaries between contemporary epistemic systems (Cant, 2020). In the UK, this has often led to aspects of South Asian indigenous knowledge being drawn into

Western epistemological frameworks, removed from religious origins, and commodified within wellbeing economies (Antony, 2018). At the same time, traditional healing is often used by migrants in the UK as a resource to assert cultural identity (Cant, 2020). The colonial epistemological divide between food and medicine is often not found in South Asian knowledge systems, where therapeutic diets are considered important by traditional medicinal systems like Ayurveda (Waldstein, 2018; Aziz *et al.*, 2021).

Related to this, the globalisation and reinterpretation of ethnobotanical knowledge through a colonising lens has also impacted upon food cultures - for instance curry, arguably the dish defining the culinary history of British imperialism (Leong-Salobir, 2011). The term curry was invented by the British, homogenising a wide variety of local dishes, to designate a spicy stew typically eaten over rice (Zubaida, 2009; Leong-Salobir, 2011). Today, along with 'Indian' cuisine, which has been globalised as a homogenous category, ignoring the wide diversity of cultures and regional nuances of cuisines in South Asia, curry is found internationally, removed from the context and intricacies of its origins due to initial colonial processes (Zubaida, 2009).

#### *History and impact of colonisation and decolonisation on botany collections in Britain*

A global network of Botanical Gardens across British colonies played a key role in the expansion of the British Empire - both in the identification and classification of plants in the local flora, in the extraction and transfer of knowledge about biocultural properties of plants, in the introduction of new crops in different regions and, in the export of plants recognised as economically valuable by colonialists. Royal Botanic Gardens (RBG) Kew, for example, had a focal position in the dissemination of plant specimens from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. The links between Kew and India were particularly strong under the directorship of Sir William Jackson Hooker and, subsequently, his son Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker. Joseph Hooker travelled extensively in India collecting new plant species which he sent back to his father at Kew (Desmond, 1999). In 1880, Kew was offered the botanical collections of the former East Indian Company's Museum (Desmond, 2007), subsequently forming a reserve collection of Indian specimens and artefacts, to be used "for the supply of future applicants" (Cornish *et al.*, 2020). Many duplicates were sent to museums around Britain (Cornish *et al.*, 2022). Huge numbers of specimens were sent from botanical gardens and other colonial organisations in Asia to Kew from the late eighteenth century. In 1878 the Timber Museum

at Kew received over 1000 specimens of timber from the Indian Forestry Department (Desmond, 2007). Indian botanic gardens had an important role acclimatising, cultivating, propagating and distributing plants such as teak, coffee, tobacco, nutmeg, cinnamon, loquats and mango (Noltie, 1999). The Vascular collections at Amgueddfa Cymru contain several cotton specimens from the Ganeshkhind Botanical Garden, via the Imperial Institute, collected in 1938 from several locations including Multan Punjab, Kathiawar and Broach Guzarat (now renamed Bharuch).

A series of grand international exhibitions during colonial times, such as the Great Exhibition 1851, Colonial and India Exhibition 1886, Calcutta International Exhibition 1883, Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1925 and Empire Exhibition in Glasgow in 1938 served as showcases of the resources, new innovations and craftsmanship from across the British Empire but also as a statement of power and superiority between different Western powers. Afterwards, the specimens and artefacts from the exhibitions were dispersed; several examples are found in the collections of Amgueddfa Cymru.

### **Context of Amgueddfa Cymru collections**

Like many Western museums, Amgueddfa Cymru is rooted in a history of colonialism and continues to benefit from colonialism through loan or reproduction fees. The Museum's decolonisation project aims to raise awareness of the close links of the institution itself to colonialism, the number of specimens that came originally from the colonies and the close association between many of the Museum's important benefactors and donors and the colonies. Many of the Asian specimens held by Amgueddfa Cymru date back to the mid-nineteenth century. However, it is difficult to know the age of the oldest specimens in the collection since many of the specimens do not have a date or origin and many have changed hands several times over the decades. For example, several timber specimens were collected by the Forestry Service of India, sent to RBG Kew and then distributed to other institutions and collectors before coming to Amgueddfa Cymru.

Whilst carrying a history of extraction, Economic Botany collections are important resources for the conservation of biological and cultural diversity, preserving, transmitting and generating environmental knowledge for education and research (Salick *et al.*, 2019; Martins, 2021; Nicol and Pardoe, 2022) as well as records of a point in time. Following enactment of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, a small

research project explored the Economic Botany collection's relevance to wider well-being goals, highlighting how the collection can support learning about the diverse cultural heritage connected to plants, their multiple values and potential community connections (Nicol and Pardoe, 2022). This project drew attention to the Economic Botany collection and catalysed further focus within the Decolonising Programme to explore this specific collection and its links to colonialism. Decolonising aims within the Economic Botany collection include analysis to discover the colonial histories of specimens and co-curating museum specimens with community groups (Nicol and Pardoe, 2022).

The Amgueddfa Cymru botany collections that include specimens with South Asian links include: the Economic Botany collection, Materia Medica, Vascular herbarium, Non-vascular herbarium, Botanical illustrations and Timber collection, as further detailed below.

#### *Economic Botany Collection*

The Economic Botany Collection comprises approximately 5500 specimens with either economic or cultural value from all over the world (see Cornish, *et al.*, 2020; Cleal, *et al.*, 2022). The collection includes plant-based food products, seeds, fruits, and raw materials such as rubber, fats and oils, tanning materials and fibres (Cleal, *et al.*, 2022) (for example, turmeric Figure 1). It includes global specimens, with a significant number from India, Southeast Asia and East Africa (Cornish *et al.*, 2020) and is divided into sections according to use, including medicinal plants, food and raw materials. The specimens were mainly acquired during the 1920s and 1930s, largely through donation, purchase or official collecting by curators. The main donors included the RBG, Kew, the Imperial Institute, London and Singleton Park, Swansea, supplemented by donations from companies (such as Sutton & Sons and British Oil and Cake Mills), individuals and official collecting.

#### *Materia Medica collection*

The Materia Medica collection was assembled by Professor Terry Turner, who collected plant products with medicinal properties (including roots, leaves, seeds and resins) from across the world (for example, cardamom Figure 2). The collection of 469 specimens was donated to Amgueddfa Cymru in 2007 (Cornish, *et al.*, 2020; Cleal *et al.*, 2022; Nicol and Pardoe, 2022). 91 specimens in this collection come from South Asia.



Figure 1. Turmeric is valued for its antiseptic properties (NMW 21.345.10) Nathan Kitto 2022 ©Amgueddfa Cymru.

### Vascular herbarium

The Vascular Plant collection holds around 300,000 pressed plant specimens (see Cleal *et al.*, 2022). The majority of specimens originate in Wales and other parts of the UK. Around 10% of the collection comes from outside of Europe. There are 141 cabinets, containing around 30,000 pressed herbarium specimens from outside Europe or that are cultivated, arranged according to Durand number.

### Non-vascular collection

Amgueddfa Cymru holds approximately 400,000 non-vascular plant specimens including bryophytes, liverworts, lichens, algae, fungi and slime moulds (Cleal *et al.*, 2022). Like the Vascular herbarium, around 10% of this collection comes from outside of Europe.

### Botanical illustrations

The Museum holds approximately 7000 botanical illustrations (see Lazarus and Pardoe, 2003; Cleal *et al.*, 2022). Two notable collections originate in South Asia. The first is a selection of prints from the *Plants of the Coast of Coromandel*, commissioned by William Roxburgh. The original paintings were by anonymous local artists (Carter, 1988). The second collection is a set of prints of new species of rhododendrons originally collected by Joseph Hooker on his travels in India (1848-1851) (Desmond, 1999).

### Timber collection

Amgueddfa Cymru holds a collection of some 12,000 timber specimens from across the world; approximately 500 come from South Asia (Spears *et al.*, 1997).



Figure 2. Specimen of cardamon from the *Materia Medica* collection (NMW V.2007.020.220) Nathan Kitto 2022 ©Amgueddfa Cymru.



## Methods

This section outlines the methods of the *Rights and Rites* project focussing on the series of three interactive community workshops.

### *Digitising botanical specimens from South Asia*

A key approach to making the collections more accessible is digitisation of specimens, producing images that can be shared with researchers and the wider public. The *Rights and Rites* project aimed to digitise all botanical specimens from South Asia. Several digitisation techniques were used, depending on the size and form of the specimens. Curators worked through the collections of herbarium specimens, economic botany, materia medica and timber systematically, extracting those specimens from South Asian countries for digitisation, supported by records on the electronic database and in catalogues. Specimens in the non-vascular collections of bryophytes, lichens, fungi liverworts and slime moulds are arranged alphabetically, irrespective of geographical origin, which makes it more difficult to separate specimens that originate in South Asia. Rarely did specimens have specific collecting localities or the name of the collector.

Initially 2D images were created using a high



Figure 3. Creating three-dimensional images of South Asian specimens ©Heather Pardoe 2022.

quality digital SLR camera. Micrograph equipment was used to take close up images. Subsequently new high-tech 3D scanning equipment was used to produce 3D images of 24 specimens (Figure 3). The number of 3D scans was limited by the requirements of the equipment in terms of size, texture and surface reflection.

The uses of the selected species as foods and medicines were researched. Efforts were also made to elucidate the provenance of the specimens, to trace the histories of individual specimens and collections and to identify, where possible, the original collectors. Some specimens were added to the Amgueddfa Cymru Collections Management System for the first time and further identified information, such as medicinal properties of the species, was added to the database in the Notes section.

However, we acknowledge that digitisation of specimens remains only a tool that can support engagement processes. Outreach and engagement processes such as community workshops are critical in learning how to make collections more accessible. The knowledge systems within which digitisation processes reside also need to be considered with a critical lens.

### *Rights and Rites workshops*

In Autumn 2022 three community workshops were hosted, centred on plants of South Asian origin from the Economic Botany Collection. The first workshop focussed on 'Plants in Medicine', the second on 'Plants as Food' and the third on 'Plants in Ritual and Celebration'.

Workshops were structured with the aim of exploring three key topics:

- 1) plants as medicine, food or in ritual and celebration;
- 2) experience, expectations and aspirations regarding perceptions of and access to Amgueddfa Cymru's collections;
- 3) ideas around how participants and curators might work together to improve access to the collections and enhance the collections with community-based knowledge and cultural heritage.

At each workshop, three members of the research team (a botany curator, the Project Manager for Decolonising Collections and a qualitative researcher) acted as co-facilitators. One of the research team members actively participated in the workshop as an individual with mixed South Asian heritage. A fifth member of the project team



explained the digitisation process and shared images of additional specimens. The workshops began by introducing participants to:

- 1) the decolonisation programme;
- 2) the Economic Botany Collection and;
- 3) the *Rights and Rites* project.

Participants were then invited to explore a selected range of approximately 25 specimens of South Asian origin from the non-accessioned handling collection (which could be handled) and accessioned economic botany collection (which could not be handled). The workshop facilitators then used a series of prompts and questions, listed below, to guide discussions around the three broad topics outlined above.

Specific workshop question:

- 1) We invite you to think of a personal memory, if you have one, connected to a plant used as medicine (workshop 1), food (workshop 2), ritual and/or celebration (workshop 3). Are there any spices that you use regularly medicinally (workshop 1), in cooking (workshop 2), for celebration or in ritual (workshop 3) that are not on display?

Questions for all workshops:

- 2) How do you think your shared knowledge could be presented in a museum setting, if at all?
- 3) How, if at all, would you like to engage with diverse knowledge connected to medicinal plants?
- 4) Does anyone have any ideas for ways of exhibiting and working with biocultural knowledge connected to medicinal plants?
- 5) Do you feel that your community heritage currently is or could be part of the museum archive of spices, based upon discussions today?
- 6) Do you think there are ways that the communities you are part of could benefit in collaboration with the museum?

#### Workshop details

Workshops were attended by a total of 34 people (Table 1). The first two workshops were hosted at the Amgueddfa Cymru Clore Discovery Centre at National Museum Cardiff. The third workshop was hosted at a community space in South Cardiff. Each workshop lasted approximately two hours.

Participants were recruited predominantly through approaching community centres, projects and groups linked to South Asia (including places of worship, for example, local mosques, temples and the Hare Krishna centre) as well as building new links with community projects, yoga teachers and ayurvedic professionals. We also promoted the workshops amongst identified stakeholders, through social media and stakeholder contacts. Some participants attended more than one workshop, and a few attended all three.

Ethical guidelines issued by the British Sociological Association (BSA 2017) and Amgueddfa Cymru (Amgueddfa Cymru, 2019) were followed in the organisation, facilitation and data analysis of these workshops. We sought informed consent from all those who attended. Prior to the workshops, all participants were sent an Information Sheet and Participant Consent Form. In the workshop, we provided further space for participants to read these documents. Participants were invited to claim £50 to cover their time for attending the workshops. We emphasised that the workshops aimed to encourage discussion and that all perspectives are welcomed. If anyone felt uncomfortable with anything or wanted to discuss something privately, we encouraged them to email the research team or speak with us directly. Workshops were digitally audio-visually recorded and discussions were analysed thematically.

#### Analysis

In this section, key findings from the *Rights and Rites* workshops are presented.

Table 1. Details of the three workshops.

Workshop	Venue	Number of Participants
Plants as medicine	National Museum Cardiff	13
Plants as food	National Museum Cardiff	15
Plants in ritual and celebration	Grange Pavilion, Cardiff	6

### *A summary of responses to pre-workshop questionnaires*

An average of over 70% of workshop participants were born in Pakistan or India or had Asian heritage. Most had visited at least one Museum branch prior to the workshop, in most cases National Museum Cardiff. Personal interest and cultural links were identified as the main reasons for joining the workshops. Many participants expressed an interest in spices, cooking and the medicinal use of plants. The majority of people questioned stated that they felt that the Museum was a safe, inclusive space and felt represented by the Museum.

### *Workshop one: Plants as Medicine*

#### *Workshop key themes*

In the first workshop, the 13 participants were invited to explore selected handling and accessioned medicinal plant specimens from the Economic Botany collection (the latter are specimens held in the permanent collections, each with a unique accession number). These specimens were selected from the Economic Botany collection stores and displayed on a table in the workshop room. Participants were invited to touch and smell specimens from the handling collection, most of which had been recently purchased from South Asian food stores in Cardiff. Accessioned specimens, however, remained in glass covered boxes. The research team included handling specimens since it was felt important to support the use of senses in the process of engagement. However, tasting was not encouraged due to health and safety constraints. Participants were reminded at the start of the workshop that some items on display might cause allergic reactions.

Participants were then invited to share any personal memories connected to plants used as medicine. Participants were also asked if there were any plants that they use regularly medicinally not on display. Discussions covered a range of medicinal plants that evoked memories, including basil, cloves, garlic, ginger, onion, neem and turmeric. Most of the plants on display of medicinal benefit are also used in cooking. The only exceptions mentioned were neem, ashwagandha, betel nut (areca nut), and triphala (an ayurvedic formula consisting of three Myrobalans species amalaki, bibhitaki, and haritaki).

#### *Turmeric*

Turmeric was a popular, familiar plant regularly used by many of the workshop participants (Figure 1). In Ayurvedic terms, it is considered to have 'warming' properties. Some highlighted the

antiseptic and anti-bacterial properties of turmeric, observing how it can be taken internally to sooth sore throats or applied externally to cuts and grazes. Another participant described how it is used as a paste to heal the perineum following childbirth. Several participants agreed consuming turmeric fresh is best. One participant, trained in both Ayurvedic medicine and Western medicine noted, if used in moderation, "in medicinal doses" it can "accelerate healing."

There was further discussion around dosage of turmeric. One participant shared how they grate a thumb-sized amount of raw turmeric into milk to sooth aches and joint pain. However, another participant noted that it has blood-thinning properties and so emphasised that it should be consumed in moderation. Another agreed that consumption of large quantities can lead to boils and heartburn.

#### *Garlic*

Garlic was another plant that was used medicinally by several participants. One participant explained how they consume a clove of garlic daily to support their heart and stabilise blood pressure. Another noted how garlic can be applied to eliminate fungal infections on nails. According to one participant "from personal experience, it is one of the most powerful [of plants] ....". Participants noted that "fresh is best". Another reflected how their partner prepares crushed garlic in warm milk to ward off infections.

#### *Workshop reflections*

Several participants noted that the Museum could be a valuable place to store and share local community knowledge of medicinal plants, as well as to support learning about indigenous, non-Western approaches to medicine, such as ayurvedic systems, to prevent the loss of this knowledge.

Alongside the collection of indigenous knowledge, discussions focussed on how information could be stored and shared. One participant recommended creating a digital database of herbs so that people could search and find out more about the medicinal properties of various plants. However, participants also urged caution concerning the sharing of information, noting "something like garlic is safe!" whilst other herbs, particularly those with contra-indications could lead to medical complications. The importance of engaging with the community to get to know "the good and the bad side of herbs" was highlighted.

Several participants agreed that the dissemination of information connected to plants is essential to keep alive knowledge and cultural heritage. The

importance of voice and incorporation of visual and audio indigenous voices was further discussed. Including indigenous elders' audio-recorded voices was suggested by some in the group. One participant suggested digital archives of elders talking about specific medicinal uses of plants would be an engaging way of imparting information to communities in Wales. As they reflected: "future generations may not be able to visit our country and meet elders who have imparted their knowledge." They considered how information around the use of plants as food and medicine is important for the health and well-being of future generations, as well as sustaining bio-cultural heritage. Some participants further stressed the importance of showing visually how medicinal plants grow and what parts of the plant are used medicinally, particularly if young community members are not able to see the plants growing *in situ*. Others also recommended taking the collections out to local communities to raise awareness and accessibility, urging curators that there "needs to be a lot more outreach."

#### *Workshop two: Plants as Food*

##### *Workshop key themes*

In the second workshop, there was much discussion around the integral role of spices in South Asian cuisine amongst the 15 participants. One participant recalled a personal memory of cooking up onion and garlic as their mum explained over the phone a family favorite curry recipe.

Discussion of spices in cooking also led to discussion around collective memories of racism experienced by participants connected to the use of spices in cooking. One recalled how they would avoid entering the kitchen when their mum was cooking to prevent their school uniform smelling of curry. Another participant recalled how, in the past, their father travelled by bus to Cardiff to get garlic and ginger, since they weren't widely available in the South Wales Valleys and how people used to avoid sitting next to him. One participant shared how they avoid cooking with spices if they are going out socially or to work. One participant recalled being bullied for smelling of curry and being called a "curry-muncher" in school. However, many emphasised that thankfully these experiences are now largely a thing of the past. One participant, for example, noted how nowadays their colleagues are often curious about the spices and fragrances in their packed lunch, whilst another observed "curry is part of our life".

##### *Green/red chilli*

One participant, a cookery teacher, noted how green chillies are used "in every household in South Asia just ... in different forms". As with many spices, there is not a strong boundary between plants as food and plants as medicine. As well as bringing flavour, chillies have a heating effect on the body and can support digestion. They noted 'panch phoron' as an important blend of five spices (fennel, fenugreek, black or brown mustard and nigella) that is used across South Asia. There was animated discussion around regional differences in uses and combinations of spices. For example, alternative ways to cook a biryani.

##### *Cinnamon*

Two participants – a mother and daughter – both shared childhood memories of cinnamon. The mother reminisced how they used to suck cinnamon bark scraped from a tree. The daughter reflected how the appreciation of cinnamon must run in the family since she used suck on cinnamon found in her mother's spice chest!

##### *Workshop reflections*

In the second workshop, there was lively discussion around how information and specimens could be displayed and shared. When discussing a cardamom specimen, one participant observed: "it's supposed to be green but it's too old", illustrating the difference between museum specimens and familiar fresh spices (Figure 2). Inclusion of specimens that are food-safe and optimum in terms of quality as a food ingredient was felt important in order to support engagement. The possibility for sensorial engagement with the spice specimens (including with scent, taste and visuals) emerged as important factors when considering potential user engagement amongst the workshop participants.

Suggestions for future activities included: community cookery workshops, maps of spices and their routes around the world and taking specimens out into the community. One participant reflected "So many people do not know where plants come from" – such as how cardamom or cinnamon grow. Ideas to address this included creation of interactive greenhouses featuring examples of plants growing. Here, there was a focus on engaging with specimens in context - including what the plants look like as well as how they can be used, whether as food or as medicine, or both.

There was further concern about loss of knowledge about both the role of plants in supporting health and well-being and traditional recipes. Participants suggested that the Museum could raise awareness of how to use foods and herbs to support health and well-being, including via online databases as well as in-person exhibitions and events such as cookery workshops.

#### *Workshop three: Plants in Ritual and Celebration*

##### *Workshop key themes*

Discussions amongst the six participants in this workshop focussed on sensorial experiences, particularly scents, including frankincense, sandalwood and sage incense.

##### *Coconut*

Several participants shared memories connected to the use of coconut in ritual and ceremony. One participant noted how coconut is used in the preparation of a sweet dish, with rice or semolina, often consumed during celebrations. They shared their memories of their mother cooking the dish saying, “These sorts of memories are fresh in my mind” (Figure 4). A Hare Krishna community member shared how a sweet coconut dish is made every Sunday and shared during ceremony. As well as offering a rich taste for special occasions, coconuts hold rich symbolic significance in South Asia as a symbol of fertility. In wedding ceremonies, brides wear a coconut shell on a wrist garland, whilst grooms smash a coconut when they enter. Offered as gifts at weddings, coconuts are also broken at the start of a new ventures for good luck – such as when moving house. The Hare Krishna community also view coconut as a symbolic representation of Vishnu.

##### *Tulsi*

The Hare Krishna member of the workshop presented one single tulsi leaf, explaining how one leaf of tulsi is always added during preparation of a meal because the deity Krishna particularly liked it. He also presented a string of prayer beads made of tulsi wood, considered a symbol of purification of mind, body and spirit and thought to ward off negative energy (Figure 5).

##### *Frankincense*

Participants discussed burning as a way of cleansing and purifying a space and how the use of incense, such as frankincense, can induce meditative states. They explained how incense is often used in ceremonies, and in Buddhism smoke is related to the spirit. Wedding clothes are infused with scent.

##### *Reflections*

In this workshop the burning of incense, initiated by one of the workshop participants, with fire and scent affecting the senses, supported a sense of calm and more reflective atmosphere. Across all workshops scent emerged as a means of connecting with memories and practices.

Several participants further discussed the practice of offering food before you eat. In this sense, one workshop participant reflected “all of these things” could be used in ritual. As the Hare Krishna participant explained, the boundary between food and ritual is permeable. For some people, there are exclusions of plants as well as inclusion. Alliums for example are excluded from the Hare Krishna diet since they are considered too stimulating.



*Figure 4. This participant explains how coconuts are an integral part of wedding ceremonies in Pakistan. ©Kalpana Tagore 2022.*



Figure 5. A workshop participant explains how tulsi beads form part of his daily meditation. © Kalpana Tagore 2022.

## Findings

In this section, key findings of the *Rights and Rites* project are discussed, focussing on methods for supporting engagement in natural history collections through: 1) sensorial and participatory approaches to co-curation, 2) spaces for community dialogue, 3) outreach and 4) digitisation processes.

### 1. Sensorial and participatory approaches to co-curation

Within the *Rights and Rites* project, interactive methods for engagement supported new interpretations of the range of South Asian biocultural specimens from the Amgueddfa Cymru's botanical collections. Through engaging with the senses and providing an open space for interactive community-based dialogue, the research team sought to centre peoples' lived-experiences and bio-cultural understanding of the specimens.

Spaces that offer opportunity for creative response to materials within natural history collections can support the development of new understandings and interpretations of specimens. Workshop findings revealed how engaging with plants in different forms, such as by burning incense, smelling spices or handling specimens, can transform the dynamics in the space and enhance discussions by evoking old personal memories and experiences.

This relates to the field of Sensory Museology, which highlights the relationship between the senses and heritage. Frequently museum curation prioritises Western sensory preferences. These hierarchical systems of classification and value consider smell, taste and touch as the 'lower' bodily senses, whilst sight is considered the 'highest sense', related to reason and the mind (Classen and Howes, 2020; Duggal and Hoene, 2021). These sensory preferences were imposed on others during colonial rule and are still used in museums today, with curation often focusing on visual properties while ignoring multi-sensory elements and contexts within origin communities (Classen and Howes, 2020). Working with and integrating varied senses can help to rethink this hierarchy, while emphasising non-Western knowledge systems which perceive multisensory relationships between people and plants as part of decolonisation work (Classen and Howes, 2020).

### 2. Spaces for community dialogue

How we do research with local communities is vital within the decolonisation process. One objective of the *Rights and Rites* project was to recognise and honour expertise held in the community and to share this knowledge in a non-exploitative, non-extractive way, by developing



new partnerships with local community members and ensuring that they were recompensed for their time and their contribution properly acknowledged.

Creating open forums for community members to come together and share their expertise and lived-experience supported new understandings of plants outside of the Western knowledge systems, starting the process of dismantling the colonial frameworks within which most of the Economic Botany Collection has been interpreted to date. Processes of decolonisation within the museum context require a decentering of Western knowledge and rethinking traditional museum practices, so that diverse knowledges and lived-experiences are valued and new forms of representation and ways of working are implemented in curatorial contexts.

The workshops hosted within the *Rights and Rites* project were invaluable, but it must be recognised that this was a relatively small group that might not be representative of the broader Welsh-Asian community. Wider consultation would bring a greater range of perspectives and lived-experience. Indeed, the project would need to be considerably scaled-up to engage with all sections of the local community.

### 3. Outreach: Co-curating collections that are accessible, inclusive and utilised

Most workshop participants expressed the opinion in the questionnaires that the Museum was a safe space and stated that they particularly liked sharing personal stories and memories. However, several questioned the idea that they or their community were adequately represented in the Museum galleries or collections. In the post-workshop questionnaires, most participants said that they really enjoyed the workshops and felt that they now knew more about the Museum's collections and were more likely to visit the Museum. Nevertheless, several emphasized the need for more outreach events, targeted at schools and community centres, together with more in-person events in the Museum.

Many members of the workshops expressed concern about the potential loss of bio-cultural knowledge held within the community, including of traditional plant remedies. Several elders of the community, who had learnt about the beneficial properties of specific plants while growing up in India or Pakistan were anxious that this knowledge might be lost to younger generations of the community, born or growing up in Britain, who may not have the opportunity to spend time in



Figure 6. Participants were concerned that traditional knowledge should be safeguarded for younger generations © Kalpana Tagore 2022.



South Asia (Figure 6). They suggested that the Museum could act as a repository for indigenous knowledge, safeguarding their knowledge and expertise gained through lived-experience. The benefits of working in partnership with the Museum for community groups is that it is a publicly-accessible and publicly-funded institution, that can support long-term records, though considerations of decolonising wider museum practice would be an important part of creating this.

Into the future, appointing of community curators as well as extending community outreach work could play a key role in scaling such community engagement, valuing the importance of outreach, particularly within communities that may not be connected to museums. Allocating appropriate resources for outreach to be done well is critical and a reliable source of funding is essential to maintain sustained, committed, collaborative partnerships with local communities. More work is also necessary to make the research fully participatory, by working in partnership with community members to co-curate the research programme. Yet, decolonisation processes need to embed community presence within the institutions themselves for meaningful change to be enacted (Thomas, 2023). Such acts can be uncomfortable but require a kind of “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016).

#### 4. Digitisation processes

Discussions within the workshops suggested that sections of the Welsh community with South Asian heritage are reticent to visit the Museum, but their reasons are unclear – one potential reason is that they feel that their cultural heritage at present is under-represented by *Amgueddfa Cymu*. Digitising the South Asian specimens and populating online databases with more bio-cultural information about them is recognised as a necessary step towards making the collections more inclusive, accessible and utilised by diverse community members, working in partnership during this process. There are issues with digital sovereignty, who should be allowed access to community knowledge and how to ensure its control by owners (Hogsden and Poulter, 2012; Breckenridge, 2014). Considerations of decolonising wider museum practice are a further critical component and require engagement in rethinking institutional structures, systems of knowledge and catalogue ordering systems.

### Discussion

#### *Critical decolonisation processes*

The *Rights and Rites* project highlights the continuing

impacts of colonialism. The repercussions of colonial actions and attitudes have reverberated through the generations and across the globe and continue to pervade public spaces including Natural History collections and their cataloguing systems and curatorial approaches.

Enacting decolonising processes within Natural History collections requires resources (including physical and digital space) and a recalibration of values.

There have been long-term consequences of colonialism including via the construction of hierarchical and discriminatory systems of knowledge as well as prioritisation of certain forms of food and systems of healthcare over others. For example, the effects of malnutrition and conditions such as diabetes have been passed down through the generations. During famines the imposition of colonial systems meant that traditional systems such as Ayurvedic medicine were discouraged, and vital knowledge was lost. The effects of the widespread Bengal famine in 1943 are arguably still felt today, seen in higher levels of diabetes within the South Asian diaspora due to low metabolic capacity and the high metabolic load of Western lifestyles. Post-colonial studies further chart the collective trauma caused by partition of the Indian sub-continent (Mohanram, 2011). Indeed, colonisation processes have had, and continue to have, strong political ecological and psycho-social effects.

Furthermore, indigenous knowledge systems have been extracted and commercialised often to the detriment of the source indigenous communities. As one participant observed during the first workshop “Our health is still benefitting from colonisation!” ... “Who is making all the money today?” Natural History collections have a public duty of care to the knowledge contained within them and prevention of becoming embroiled within privatisation and commercialisation agendas around bio-cultural knowledge.

The ethnobotanical concept of ‘food-medicines’, describing food that is ingested to obtain a therapeutic action, is a useful starting point to understand how spices can be understood as both food and medicine (Aziz et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant in the South Asian context where spices are integral to everyday life – as food and as medicine and, in many cases, both combined. Helping to deconstruct colonial epistemological divisions between medicine and food, the importance of therapeutic diets is stated by traditional medicinal systems like Ayurveda

(Waldstein, 2018). Arguably, context influences how food-medicines are categorised, relating to factors like education, age, plant availability and plant properties including taste and heating or cooling qualities. The latter is often important in South Asian communities, with bitter tastes, like neem, seen as counteracting sweetness, useful for treating diseases like diabetes (Jennings *et al.*, 2015). Heating plants, like black pepper, help to treat cold illnesses like pneumonia, and cooling plants, like tulsi or ginger, are used for fevers (Jennings *et al.*, 2015). Such perspectives may prompt a review of categorisation in collections such as the Economic Botany Collection at Amgueddfa Cymru. Digitisation can allow scope for multiple categories to be attached to specimens, for example, by tagging species recognized in traditional Ayurvedic systems as warming or cooling species, thus acknowledging non-Western systems of classification.

#### *Context of research in Wales*

It was significant that this research was conducted in Wales where the Senedd Cymru, the Welsh Government, have put in place a series of measures to support programmes of decolonisation and anti-racism in public bodies. This contrasts with the situation in England where the Westminster government has been less supportive. For example, in 2020 Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden outlined in a letter to national museums in England government expectations of “Arm’s Length Bodies’ approach to issues of contested heritage to be consistent with the Government’s position” and warned that they “should not be taking actions motivated by activism or politics” (Dowden, 2020).

In Wales, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is an innovative piece of legislation that requires Amgueddfa Cymru, as a public body, to consider their impact on people living in Wales (Lane and Williams, 2019). The Act states seven well-being goals (Welsh Government, 2015). The *Rights and Rites* project supports several of these goals including aspirations for a healthier, more equal, more cohesive, more prosperous, more resilient and more globally responsible Wales. Legislation, such as the Well-being Act, and regulations that actively supports decolonisation processes amongst public bodies such as museums, is critical for these processes to unfold in meaningful and embedded ways.

#### *Decolonising botanical specimens from South Asia: project outputs and outcomes*

The *Rights and Rites* project showed the benefit of

putting a spotlight on a discrete part of the collection that has hitherto received relatively little attention, providing an opportunity to consider how to make collections more representative and accessible to the local community and also to evaluate different approaches to decolonising the collections.

The curation and documentation of the specimens has improved. Discussions during the workshops have provided new interpretations and cultural context for individual specimens and highlighted gaps in the collection. In response, new specimens have been purchased and added, to make the collections more representative of local Welsh-Asian communities. How and where to record anecdotal information is a more difficult issue. The South Asian specimens represent only a small fraction of the entire botanical collections, so it will be a lengthy process to fully decolonise these collections.

The project aimed to make the specimens from South Asia more accessible through digitisation. The application of newly-purchased scanning equipment was the initial reason for funding, so, inevitably, digitisation played a prominent role in the project. A library of 1015 two-dimensional images has been produced which can be used for reference and further research. The images are currently held in an internal library, but they will be added to the Museum’s web pages, thereby increasing access for local and more remote audiences. A list of digitised specimens is available on request from the authors. The three-dimensional images have been published on the Sketchfab website. Digitisation has the added advantage that the original specimens need to be handled less, benefitting their conservation.

However, digitisation is just one tool to improve access to collections. Equally important is more extensive outreach and public engagement, so that members of the public can see items from the collections and understand the context of the specimens without necessarily visiting the Museum. Within the Museum, access could be improved by making the gallery interpretation available in more languages. Furthermore, access could be increased through more public tours of the collection, or through conventional media or social media.

The project results have been disseminated through films, tweets, blogs and presentations. Six project blogs were produced by community partners, and members of the research team. The blogs by community partners gave new perspectives on the use of plants in different

cultural contexts, promoting inter-community understanding. Results of the project were disseminated through reports and presentations to Amgueddfa Cymru curatorial staff, Museum trustees and supporters, and Arts and Humanities Research Council representatives.

#### *Plans for the future*

Work on this project has supported progress towards several long-term objectives to develop the Botany collections. One objective is to make the collections more representative of the local community served by the museum, so that all visitors see specimens in the galleries and collections with which they can identify, to feel included, welcome and respected. The workshops attracted several people who were visiting the Museum for the first time. It is essential that museum curators continue to work with and open up curation to expertise from local communities and plan events and exhibitions that cater for wider demographics within the places they serve.

The Botany collections contained substantially more specimens from South Asia than anticipated, so there are more specimens to be digitised and registered. Additional work is also needed to fully research the provenance and country of origin of the specimens from South Asia. Often the person who actually collected or created the specimens is unknown; the collection is frequently known by the name of the person that amassed the collection rather than the individual collector (see [natsca.blog/2023/10/26/how...](https://natsca.blog/2023/10/26/how...) @JackDAshby @CamUnivMuseums). However, further research on archival records and specimen labels may yield new insights. Where we do know the collector or donor, understanding their personal histories can provide valuable context for the collection.

#### *Challenges*

The implementation of the project presented several challenges. The design of the funding application meant that the project design and strategy were largely pre-determined at the beginning of the project, with little opportunity for members of the community to influence the approach, so in that sense it was not fully participatory. The project was initially planned by two curators with science backgrounds, so the emphasis was on learning more about specimens in the collection, rather than critically examining the role of the curators, or perception of the Museum. The interdisciplinary nature of the project, encompassing both botany and social science, was an important consideration in the project design and was supported by the inclusion of social science

researchers with an interest in participatory methods.

Another source of difficulty was the very short lead-in time to the project, only a matter of 4 months between funding approval and the project starting. This meant that new plans for project activities had to be fitted at short notice into established Museum long-term plans for events and translation, which created friction. The duration of the grant was short, only seven months, which left limited time to plan and run the workshops. There was not sufficient time to fully curate all the botany specimens from South Asia. Another issue raised by the project was conflicting demands on curators, trying to balance access to the collections with their responsibility for the care, conservation and security of specimens. This was addressed by purchasing a selection of herbs and spices for handling that were expendable and also keeping handling specimens separate from accessioned specimens. Furthermore, having developed new partnerships with local communities, it was frustrating that these could not be developed further due to lack of funding and time constraints. Nevertheless, small, focused projects such as this play an important role in the decolonisation agenda at the Museum, making it more open and responsive to the expectations of the communities it serves. Some members of the research team were further challenged by lack of support for investment of time in outreach processes by some departments within the Museum. Decolonisation processes thus need to be supported by more open and responsive internal approaches.

#### **Recommendations**

Seven recommendations for working with communities on Natural History collections from a decolonising lens are offered:

1. Participatory community workshops and digitisation processes can enhance engagement with natural history collections as well as encompassing multiple knowledge systems.
2. Natural history curators can work with the senses - including via touch, smell, sound and sight - to promote deeper connections to plant species and specimens and memories amongst communities.
3. Institutions with natural history collections need to recognise the value of and commit to investment in long-term meaningful outreach to build links with communities, including those

who are not presently engaged in the collections. This includes budgeting adequately for outreach within community engagement projects and appropriately compensating the time it takes community members to engage – this could include for example a travel and expenses fund and/or stipends, as well as new roles for community curators.

4. Institutions with natural history collections can work with academic interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary partners to foster a continuously evolving critical, embedded and reflexive lens on the decolonising process.
5. Networking and building global communities of practice can support best practice, build relationships and support knowledge exchange across communities.
6. For decolonisation processes to unfold in a meaningful way, legislation that enables decolonisation processes and principles of sustainable development within public bodies at local, regional and national level are important.
7. There needs to be wider institutional change that prioritises an ethics of care, including support for spaces for open dialogue and allyship for decolonising processes to occur.

## Conclusion

The *Rights and Rites* project enabled re-examination of a small section of the Amgueddfa Cymru's botanical collections derived from South Asia. The historical labels, categories and descriptions accompanying the specimens were devised through colonial and imperial attitudes, methods and systems of knowledge. Through a decolonising lens, gaps in understanding of the specimens become boldly apparent. This knowledge gap inspired a series of workshops with members of local Welsh communities who also have South Asian heritage. Through creating space to listen to their lived-experiences, the research team gained insight into memories, traditions, languages and cultures connected to the plants from their homes here in Wales and also their ancestral homes.

The workshops provided opportunities to share knowledge of Asian plants and their uses held by individuals in the community. The handling specimens provided a sensory experience for those involved, the smell and texture of the spices in particular evoking memories of childhood experiences and familiar rituals of home. As complex narratives and deeper cultural

understandings of each specimen were shared, it became clear that each can tell a multitude of histories from many different geographical perspectives. The frequent experiences of racism in South Wales often relayed through stories related to food - further highlights the importance of centring varied and diverse perspectives of community members in the museum space, including those with South Asian heritage.

In the short-term, the *Rights and Rites* project has provided cultural context for specimens in the collection, encouraged curators to consider how the collections should be developed to make them more representative of the diverse communities living in Wales and how partnerships with local community groups could be developed and enhanced. In the longer term, improved curation and digitisation of the specimens from South Asia will increase access to these specimens. As participants suggested, the digitisation aspect of this project could usefully contribute to creating digital databases with medicinal information, recipes, stories and other forms of knowledge, while exercising caution with data sovereignty and ownership of knowledge in this context.

*Rights and Rites* has demonstrated the power of bringing people together in the museum context. Further engagement activities need to adequately invest in and value outreach to make Amgueddfa Cymru more welcoming to everyone in the local community, as part of the broader efforts to decolonise the Museum. In addition to exploring and re-interpreting objects in our collections, the *Rights and Rites* project acted as a reminder to the research team and visitors that the museum is a public asset and that all are welcome and should feel comfortable, included and free to engage with and explore the collections and facilities.

*Rights and Rites* highlighted the current knowledge deficit at present in relation to spices and herbs extracted from lands during colonialism. One of the three workshops was hosted outside of the museum space, in a community space. However, all of the workshops could have been conducted outside the Museum. This entails more effort to transport the specimens safely and securely and is more costly, but this may have the effect of changing the dynamic within the workshop, creating a more informal atmosphere outside the austere setting of the Museum.

Whilst the project led to a greater understand of South Asian specimens in the collection, at the same time many more avenues for research and new questions emerged. The project highlighted

the many difficulties inherent in carrying out decolonisation work, many related to the entrenched colonial epistemologies within museum curation, administration and research. What was evident throughout was that the participants' knowledge and connection to each of the specimens, obtained through their personal lived-experiences, in fact made them the experts in this field. From a decolonising perspective the museum's job is to co-curate knowledge and collections with members of local communities, to remove perceived barriers, while remaining open to the discomfort and messiness of dismantling and transforming colonial structures. Decolonisation programmes further need time, resources and an ethics of care to prevent the burden of this uncomfortable and challenging task ahead landing on individuals or departments. This ethics of care requires more attention.

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