

Case for support for the project

The indigenous map: native information, ethnographic object, artefact of encounter

Focus and significance

The project seeks to document the extent of indigenous maps within the RGS-IBG collections; to consider the contexts of their acquisition, and their subsequent histories; and to explore their historical significance as sources of geographical information, as ethnographic objects and as artefacts of encounter.

This project will be the first to consider the extent, variety and significance of indigenous maps within the RGS collections. During the long nineteenth century so-called 'native maps' were typically acquired, commissioned or co-produced in the process of geographical exploration and territorial expansion preceding the imposition of formal colonial rule. In some contexts, at the time of collection and since, they have been treated as potentially valuable evidence concerning the geography of unknown or inaccessible territories; in others, notably in historical or anthropological studies of non-western mapping, as ethnographic objects to be studied in their own right. The development of relational approaches to material culture, especially in the study of ethnographic museum collections over the last decade, suggests new ways of conceptualising these maps in terms of exchange and encounter.

Institutional context

The RGS-IBG holds one of the largest private map collections in the world, including one million sheets of maps and charts, 3000 atlases, 40 globes and 1000 gazetteers. While the bulk of the collection consists of scientifically-surveyed printed maps and charts from official mapping agencies, it also includes a large number of manuscript maps from a wide variety of sources. While this collection has generated significant research since the foundation of the Society in 1830, much of this work has been devoted to conventional topics in the history of western cartography, including the use of maps in studies in historical geography and topography, the progress of mapping of the earth's surface within orthodox scientific paradigms (for example in the context of the development of new techniques of survey) and the study of exemplary or rare maps of value to antiquarians, collectors and historical scholars. In recent years, the Society's support for Collaborative Studentships has enabled new approaches to the study of its collections, notably in the context of photography, manuscripts and instruments. While maps have figured in some of the resulting work (notably Lowri Jones' 2010 PhD), this would be the Society's first collaborative doctoral project in which they are central.

In 2005, the RGS-IBG collections were awarded Designated Status by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council in recognition of their national and international significance in extending 'understanding of cultural exchange and encounters around the world'. The Society's strategic commitment to promoting cross-cultural understanding has extended well beyond scholarly research to its public engagement and education programmes. This commitment was evident in a highly successful series of exhibitions under the 'Crossing Continents' programme funded by HLF, which included projects on Bombay Africans, the Punjab, Afghanistan and China. This provided the institutional context for an AHRC-funded research project on *Hidden Histories of Exploration*, resulting in a public exhibition at the Society (Driver & Jones 2009). The research for this project, as well as work in preparation for teaching on a University of London bi-annual summer school course on mapping for curators, enthusiasts and independent scholars (part of which takes place at the Society) has revealed the potential for wider study of the indigenous maps within the RGS-IBG collections.

This project also has potential to feed into future cross-institutional projects within the CDP on cultures of indigenous mapping and navigation involving the RGS, the Royal Society and the Science Museum. For example, one possible legacy of the doctorate could be a major exhibition of a kind which can only take place in a museum context, bringing into public view the history of non-western mapping traditions through the display of iconic materials in various media (manuscript, print, tracing, natural materials, etc) from the RGS-IBG and other collections. Research for such an exhibition project, juxtaposing map objects from very different cultural contexts, is far beyond the capacity of any single doctoral project. As well as requiring major resources and planning over a period of four or five years, it would call on a much wider network of curatorial and academic expertise. The model here is the *Hidden Histories of Exploration* project that began with a CDA and evolved into a full AHRC research grant (though the kind of exhibition envisaged here would be on a larger scale and in a museum setting).

Academic context

The study of indigenous maps raises fundamental questions of definition and approach. The terms have varied over time – for example, the ‘native information’ of the nineteenth century became the ‘indigenous knowledge’ of the late twentieth. Whether in colonial discourse or postcolonial indigenous studies, such terms are typically defined relationally and they often presume fundamental differences between western and non-western mapping systems. As well as addressing the history of approaches to the definition of the ‘indigenous map’, therefore, this project will necessarily build on influential critiques of imperial cartography (such as Harley, 2001) to consider the relationship between western and non-western mapping (Raj 2006), and the epistemological and historical integrity of the ‘indigenous map’ as a concept. These are fundamental and challenging questions which will involve engagement with work in a number of disciplines, notably anthropology, geography and museum studies.

At least until the early twentieth century, the ‘native map’ was primarily of interest to geographers insofar as it contained valuable information concerning the geography of unknown or inaccessible territories. To generalise broadly, such objects – whether drawn on paper, traced in ink or marked on some other material such as hide, wood or fabric – were valued less for their material form or their cultural function *in situ* than for the information they contained: in this sense, there was a direct equivalence in their potential uses between oral testimony and native maps. Both were valued as potentially informing scientific survey and mapping, rather than as a guide to indigenous cosmologies (though understanding the latter could be a further way of extending the former). While the informational content of such maps has continued to be subject to scholarly debate up to the present, it is the status of these maps as ethnographic objects that has tended to predominate in more recent scholarship: as an example, compare the approach to ‘Tupaia’s map’ in di Piazza & Pearthree (2007) with that of Thomas (1997) or Turnbull (1998).

If the study of indigenous maps today occupies a significant place within the history of cartography, that is in no small measure due to the achievements of the multi-volume *History of Cartography* project established by Brian Harley and David Woodward and published by the University of Chicago Press, in whose very conception the specificity of modern western mapping was acknowledged. The early volumes published in the 1980s and 1990s thus included studies of cartography in ‘prehistoric, ancient and medieval Europe’, in ‘traditional Islamic and South Asian societies’, in ‘traditional East and Southeast Asian societies’, and in ‘traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian and Pacific societies’. While these landmark volumes triumphantly established the richness and diversity of mapping traditions in different cultural contexts, they are today less reliable as a guide to wider debates over what defines a map and what, in particular, makes it ‘indigenous’. The titles of these volumes, as well as the guiding structure of the series as a whole, tended towards an *a priori* demarcation of both periods and cultures, and in combination the effect was to perpetuate entrenched binary assumptions concerning traditional and modern, or the west and the non-west.

As noted by many individual contributions to the History of Cartography project, the distinction between what is western and what is indigenous, as far as maps are concerned, is far from simple or straightforward. Outstanding historical studies by G. Malcolm Lewis (1988) on native American mapping in the colonial period and Thomas Bassett (1998) on West African maps in a variety of materials and forms suggests a much greater degree of hybridity in such maps than might be supposed. On the one hand, in various different ways, depending on the context, indigenous peoples appropriated western conventions, techniques and materials, deploying them for their own purposes. On the other, the practice of colonial mapping - often represented in postcolonial writings as simply erasing all sign of indigenous presence (which of course it often sought to do) - actually depended in various ways on indigenous labour, and sometimes too on indigenous cosmologies and languages. While much depends on the context, the idea that such maps were co-produced presents an important shift in perspective, raising questions for further investigation in the archive (Belyea, 1992; Driver & Jones, 2009; Lefebvre, 2009; and on Tupaia's map, see Parsons, 2015). Conceptualising maps in terms of exchange and encounter, even if the exchanges were often unequal and the encounters uneven, requires a new approach to the study of maps such as those typically found within the collections of the RGS-IBG.

Research questions

The project seeks to establish the extent and significance of indigenous maps within the RGS-IBG collections. This requires (1) consideration of the idea of the indigenous map and the different approaches to it (What is an indigenous map? How has its definition changed over time? How should it be studied?); (2) evaluation of the extent of indigenous maps within the RGS-IBG collections, taking seriously the indigenous contribution to printed and manuscript maps made by (western) explorers and surveyors, as well as map objects made by indigenous peoples (How far and in what ways is the labour and knowledge of indigenous peoples reflected in the RGS-IBG map collection? How much of the collection is or could be described as 'indigenous?'); (3) study of the contexts in which maps were acquired by or donated to the RGS-IBG, and the processes by which they were accessioned into its collections (By what channels did such maps come into the collection? How were they subsequently managed?); (4) research into the uses of indigenous maps within the activities of the Society, including its journals and lectures (How were indigenous maps studied and used at the Society? What sorts of approach were typical?); (5) in-depth case studies of particular map objects, especially understood as objects of exchange and encounter (In what ways were such maps co-produced? In what ways does the encounter model offer new ways of approaching them?)

Methodology

The Society's map collection, including both printed and manuscript maps, is fully catalogued at item level. However, there is no simple way of delimiting the scope of this project around a specific number of maps at an early stage: indeed, questions of definition are core to the project, as stated above. The catalogue enables identification of a preliminary sample of maps produced by 'native' hands (approximately 50 items including a variety of route maps, plans and charts, such as a Gujerati pilot's chart of the Arabian and African coasts, dated 1835 but more likely to be seventeenth-century in origin, which was recently loaned to the British Museum's Hajj exhibition). However its utility for this study is inevitably constrained by cataloguing conventions and decisions made by previous generations of map librarians. Closer study of the collection, along with digitised publications and manuscript archives, will undoubtedly reveal further examples of maps produced by indigenous people (such as the remarkable maps of trans-Saharan caravan routes drawn by slaves and Arab traders in the 1820s which were acquired by the explorer Hugh Clapperton) and a much large number of maps and charts based on 'native information'.

The methodological framework of the project has two dimensions as follows:

1. The collection. At this level, drawing on the framework of comparable collections-based projects at the RGS and elsewhere, the questions will be about the shape and evolution of the collection as a whole, seeking to develop a kind of typology reflecting the variety of ways a map object could be considered 'indigenous'. This will differentiate artefacts made directly by indigenous peoples; copied or traced maps based on indigenous drawings; manuscript or printed maps containing 'native information'; and a more general category of mapwork which depended on indigenous labour for its production. This will generate a working 'inventory' of indigenous maps which will provide the basis for further empirical study of patterns of acquisition and accession, examination by material, region and context, and so on. In this part of the work, quantitative measures will be used to establish the basic extent and shape of the collection, especially as regards maps made directly by indigenous peoples or explicitly dependent on information supplied by them.

2. The map. At the level of the individual object, the questions will be focussed on contexts of creation, interpretation and re-interpretation. Insofar as evidence survives, it may be possible to produce a series of 'object biographies' tracing the contexts in which the maps were made and the routes through which the maps travelled before arriving at the RGS. It may also be possible, depending on the selection of specific maps for study, to distinguish between the use of maps as sources of information, as ethnographic objects and as artefacts of encounter. Specific examples of map objects which could be used as case studies include Clapperton's collection of paper maps of trans-Saharan caravan routes drawn by slaves and Arab traders in the 1820s (Lefebvre, 2009); engraved copies of Inuit maps included by John Ross in his Arctic narrative published by John Murray in 1835 (Craciun, 2013); a remarkable collection of manuscript maps of Burma, consisting of tracings as well as watercolour drawings made for teak trading companies, donated to the RGS in the 1870s (Driver, 2015); and the stick charts made by Marshall Islanders for navigational purposes, currently on display in the Science Museum's 'Who am I?' gallery, which were the subject of a paper presented to the RGS in 1928 by the Director of the Science Museum (Lyons 1928).

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