

# The Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford Magazine



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Cover image: Bela Yawanawá with a painted face and a feathered headdress. Her tribe live in the Rio Gregorio Yawanawá Indigenous territory within the Amazonian rainforest. (See article on Amazonia).

# Between Friends

Much has happened in the world since the last issue. I wrote then that the PRM records all facets of being human including the despicable – just the thing on all our minds as events unfold in Ukraine. In helpless need of distraction, I went to the online PRM collection catalogue to search for objects from that part of the world. As ever, an eclectic assortment tumbled out of this digital PRM cabinet: an 'Illustrated calendar for 1994', a 'Ghost coin' from the ancient Greek city of Panticapaeum, a 'Brass triptych, worn by soldiers in the Crimea' (possibly collected by Pitt Rivers himself who was a soldier in the Crimean War), a 'Blessed cake, eaten by faithful & used as a cure for sickness', along with clothes, tools, musical instruments, and so on. A rich history and culture invoked by objects ordinary and sacred. Most striking of all is a 2m tall female figure carved from stone who looms over 'The Anthropologists Fund Raising Ritual' on the ground floor. This stone 'Kammennaia Baba' dates from around the 11th century and is a type of statuary found at pagan burial sites from Bulgaria to Mongolia. The figures are usually female, generously proportioned and hold a cup at their laps: what they were intended to represent is intriguingly unclear. Their stylised features are said to have inspired avant-garde artists in the 20th century and, indeed, there is something reminiscent of a modernist figure about them – such are the delicate skeins connecting material cultures, one to another. It would be foolish to suggest that reflecting on any of these objects makes a difference just now, but cultural curiosity and understanding – as a collective undertaking enabled by a museum like the PRM and its objects – must surely help in the long run? I hope so anyway.



Photo © Anthony Flemming



'Kammennaia Baba' dates from around the 11<sup>th</sup> century

Photo: © PRM

**Anthony Flemming,**

*Member of the PRM Liaison Committee and Friend*

## Editorial



Photo © Dawn Osborne

Welcome to this latest issue of our Magazine! I have to thank the contributors for a truly wonderful issue in my eyes. Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Middle East, Oceania and Europe. Once again we have managed to cover virtually the whole world or at least the populated parts and after all, as an anthropology museum, the Pitt Rivers is focused on people and their amazing cultural practices.

At least half of this Magazine is directly related to Museum news or events at the Museum, but we always make space to add in other topics which we believe will be interesting to our members. We are working to strengthen our links with Museum staff and now have regular meetings with them to inform and enrich the content. I extend my thanks to all the Museum staff many of whom contribute to the Magazine in so many different ways.

We love to have feedback from Friends or visitors to the Museum, so please do not hesitate to let us know, using the details on the final page, what you thought of this issue or the Magazine in general.

We are especially open to receiving ideas that members have for topics they would like to be covered in the magazine. If you have direct experience or expertise on a suitable subject, and would like to contribute an article, we would be very interested to hear from you. All suggestions and offers will be discussed by the Magazine team and, if possible, progressed.

Finally, many thanks to my production, editorial and distribution teams who put in all the work to ensure that you receive the Magazine regularly. Without their contributions we could not have maintained a full service throughout the pandemic – much appreciation well deserved!

**Dawn Osborne, Editor**

# Museum News



Photo: © PRM

There is now a definite buzz across the Museum as, with restrictions now eased, visitors are again beginning to fill up our spaces and galleries. As we prepare for spring and summer there is much to which we can look forward. The PRM shop, which had been joined with Natural History Museum as part of covid measures, will return as part of our welcome platform where visitors will be able to find information

and join the visitor tours which we will be relaunching for summer. We have also been busy developing some specific new PRM products. Look out for Pitt Rivers 'Witch in a Bottle' Gin, shortbread biscuits, chocolate and lovely cards with Hawai'ian quilt designs from Cissy Serrao and 'Insect and Arachnid People of Subterranean Hawai'i' portraits by Solomon Enos. Members will, of course, continue to receive discounts in the shop and on our many new activities.

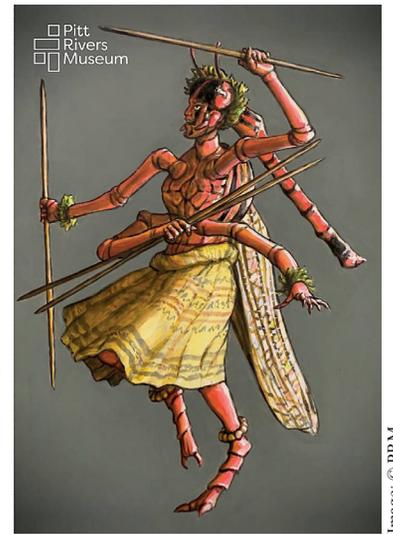
Two new members of staff will be supporting our work in this area: Catherine Booth is our new visitor service Manager and Hannah Bruce is our new Events Manager. Hannah will be responsible for running events and hiring

our spaces for receptions, dinners, workshops and, for couples looking for something a little different, weddings.

Behind the scenes, the operational side of the Museum continues to keep a close eye on visitor safety: items such as our air purifiers remain in place. In addition, the replacement of our near-obsolete emergency lighting is near completion. Led by John Simmons and Estates, this is a wonderful facility for a museum with few windows and will serve the Museum well for many years to come.

We very much hope to see all our members at the Museum and at one of our many events but, whatever you do, have a lovely spring and summer!

**Karrine Sanders** PRM Chief Operating Officer



'The Spear Catcher' by Solomon Enos

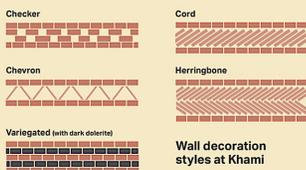
Image: © PRM

## From the Director

### Madzimbahwe The Walled Cities of Zimbabwe

The *madzimbahwe* (dry-stone walled cities) of Great Zimbabwe and Khami were built as part of social changes which created states and urban centres in southern Africa from 900-1900 CE. They were *muzinda* (capitals) of states which archaeologists now call the Zimbabwe culture. Recognised by UNESCO as world heritage sites they are also sacred sites for local communities and dwellings where ancestors reside.

The architects of Great Zimbabwe and Khami built using dry-stone walls, roofed narrow passageways, raised platforms, and conical towers by quarrying *mbwe* (granite) from nearby hills. Granite blocks were carved and engineered to lay on top of one another without any mortar in intricate patterns. At Great Zimbabwe, clusters of dry stone walls enclosed circular houses built of clay, forming *misha* (homesteads) that were occupied by multi-generational households. At Khami, *misha* were built onto raised platforms with retaining walls.



Wall decoration styles at Khami

#### Technology and Creativity

From the intricate carving of materials such as soapstone into bows and birds, to the chevrons and herringbone patterns in the stone walls and pottery people living at Great Zimbabwe and Khami expressed their artistic skill in many forms.



View of walls at Khami built in the early 1400s.

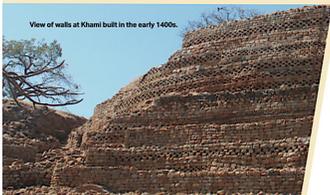


Image: © PRM

Some of my most joyful times are coming into the Museum and seeing visitors keenly engaged with members of our team, school groups listening to our education officers Mel and Becca, and young children making little colourful mice on the Clore Learning Balcony. Then, wandering around the galleries, I love seeing how visitors are engaging with recent changes, often years in the making. These include the fabulous new display that showcases objects from the astonishing Great Zimbabwe empire and from Khami, once the capital of the Kingdom of Butwa near what is now Bulawayo.

There is also an intriguing map displaying the then expansive trade-routes across the African continent that stretched out to Europe and Asia. All of these were curated by Ashley Coutu and Shadreck Chirikure. Other particularly important innovations are the new digital displays in the Museum that access 3D scans of objects, sound recordings, photographs and manuscripts. These were beautifully designed by Creative Jay and curated by Christopher Morton.

Now, after many months of first having had to stay closed and then operating with one-way routes and only minimal capacity so as to keep everyone safe, we are seeing more visitors. We reached about 50% of our pre-pandemic numbers in December and we were up to 65% in February.

Our staff are now particularly busy with schools, who are increasingly sending positive feedback to our social media channels to say how much young people enjoy being challenged to think differently by our education team and how much they love being able to make new art, play and engage with our permanent displays. Behind the scenes, there is always serious business to be done: we are now drafting our next Strategic plan, while our latest Annual Report is now available online on the PRM site.

It is however our enthusiastic visitors that remind me how grateful I am to have the best job in the world!

**Laura Van Broekhoven** Director

# Khadija Saye's 'Dwelling: In this Space We Breathe'



Photos: © PRM

*Andichurai*. Silk screen print from an original tintype; seated self-portrait holding a red clay pot with white decoration, made using techniques specific to the SeneGambia region. Universal in Gambian homes, the *andi churai* burns incense to drive away evil spirits in order to provide protection. In Gambian culture, the strong scent of the incense is closely associated with women and femininity. (2021.6.3)

*Nak Bejjen*. Silk screen print from an original tintype; seated self-portrait with cupping taking place on the back of shoulders. Gambian healers use cows' horns in rituals to suck impurities from a person's body. (2021.6.5)

In this series of nine stunning silkscreen prints, currently on display in the Upper Gallery (until 31 August 2022), artist Khadija Saye (1992-2017) explores her fascination with the "migration of traditional Gambian spiritual practices" that formed a part of her childhood experience growing up in London with Gambian parents.

In the images, Saye uses ritual objects, such as amulets, beads and horns, to explore her family connection to these spiritual practices as a member of the African diaspora.

The series also explores what Saye calls "the deep-rooted urge to find solace in a higher power" in differing cultures. Saye herself was of mixed religious heritage, both Christian and Muslim.

Khadija Saye achieved recognition as a hugely talented and promising artist and was the youngest exhibitor in the Diaspora Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale, where her work was shown alongside artists such as Isaac Julien and Yinka Shonibare.

Tragically, both Saye and her mother Mary Ajaoi Augustus Mendy were killed in the Grenfell Tower fire of 14 June 2017.

In the notes accompanying her display of these works in 2017, the catalogue notes that:

*"The series was created out of the artist's personal need for spiritual grounding after experiencing trauma. This work is based on the search for what gives meaning to our lives and what we hold onto in times of despair and life-changing challenges. We exist in the marriage of physical and spiritual remembrance. It is in these spaces that we identify with our physical and imagined bodies. Using herself as the subject, Saye felt it was necessary to physically explore how trauma is embodied in the black experience. The objects used in the*

*images are sacred and come from different spiritual healers in Gambia through a means of exchange and prayer."*

The prints exhibited were produced from scans of the artist's original tintype photographs. Tintypes are an early form of photograph, popular from the 1860s, created by exposing an image onto a prepared metal surface.

Saye said about her use of this historical photographic method:

*"The journey of making wet plate collodion tintypes is unique; no image can be replicated and the final outcome is beyond the creator's control. Within this process, you surrender yourself to the unknown, similar to what is required by all spiritual higher powers: surrendering and sacrifice."*

Khadija Saye was an inspirational artist whose social and political awareness led her to support issues of social justice and educational opportunity. The Pitt Rivers Museum acquired this set of prints as a permanent tribute to the artist and her values, and exhibited them to bring them into conversation with many displays in the Museum that relate to the themes she explores. Some of the Gambian healing and ritual objects she uses in the images can be found in the collections, such as the chewing sticks in the piece '*Sothiou*', corn horns as seen in '*Nak Bejjen*', a clay pot incense burner as seen in '*Andichurai*', and goat horns as seen in '*Ragal*'.

The acquisition of this set of prints for the Museum's permanent collection was made possible by a generous grant from the ACE/V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

**Christopher Morton,**  
Head of Curatorial, Research and Teaching

## Class within the collection

Deep within the collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum there is a tiny object that by all odds should not have survived. Easily overlooked, possibly unpleasant and arguably lacking in appeal - this fragile piece for me is brimming with emotion and meaning. I'd go as far as to say it's my favourite object in the collection, and the inspiration for a recent episode of the *'Radical Hope'* series I had the pleasure of guest curating in February this year.

The 'Tip of rabbit's tongue' barely measures over a centimetre in length. Yet here we find a huge and emotive human story – this object was used as an amulet against poverty. It's from the UK, and whilst the date is uncertain, we can assume it's from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or before.

This talisman speaks to us of magic, superstition, and belief beyond ourselves in a world where poverty was a very real and present danger. Bound within this domestic object I find more than a conversation on belief. I find locked in here the collective hopes, dreams, and fears of those at risk of poverty. To be unable to support yourself or others, to lose all you had, to go without was then (as it is now) a haunting reality of the class divides we have inherited culturally. A working-class background was far more than a social divider or economic marker – it was a financial reality that could endanger you. What happens if I can't work? What if our harvest fails? If my community fails me, can magic help? Imagine investing all that emotion and it being manifest in something so tiny yet significant. The amulet's survival is not accidental, this object has been cared for and treasured. It stands as a tiny monument of emotion for someone (perhaps a community?) whose story is now lost.

Museums across the country glitter with the histories

of the elite, privileged and top one percent. High status objects shine out to us from carefully curated cases telling a story of the past. Whose past though? The material culture of low status individuals is precarious in its survival and display. It inspired me to consider class within the collection at Pitt Rivers, and the stories it can tell us. The parallels between class distinction in British history and economy are palpable. Whether we subscribe to this today or reject notions of class – the Pitt Rivers Museum and its collection formed in a society dominated by class hierarchy. Conversations on class for me are in the very bones of the Museum. Taken further, it's fascinating to consider class narratives in the collection linked directly to Oxford itself. A city arguably considered to be elite, aspirational and via the university associated with privilege.

Our lively and in-depth session merging an online and physical audience explored class narratives in the collection. Its aim was not division, but through kindness finding a commonality as arguably in this country we have all inherited a British past (and therefore material culture) defined by class structures. In amongst a series of powerful museum pieces, none shone brighter for me than the rabbit's tongue. I gravitate towards this piece far more than say objects associated with kings or queens – because based on my background I have far more in common with the tongue than I do with a crown.

I'd love you to take some time to consider this treasure in the collection, and in turn share what you think.

**Jon Sleight, Learning Curator**



*'Tip of rabbit's tongue' (online database search number 1985.51.354)*

Photo: © PRM

# 2022 Kenneth Kirkwood Memorial Lecture Day: Last Rites

Photo: © Kalinganagar Adivasi collective

When the subject of last rites was chosen as the theme for the 2020 Kenneth Kirkwood Memorial Lecture Day, the notion that the event itself might be delayed for two years because of a global pandemic was unthinkable. When the lecture day finally came to be held this March, that choice of subject felt both prophetic and apposite.

As always, the four lectures were designed to tackle the subject from very different perspectives, and the journey through last rites practices that unfolded over the day covered everything from traditional custom to the everlasting-life fantasies of modern billionaires.



Funeral pyres for 12 Adivasi protestors against a new Tata Steel plant at Kalinganagar, Odisha in January 2006, who were killed in police firing.

In India the funeral pyre is built with great care and treated almost as a work of art, with the body usually placed fairly near the top to ensure the most complete cremation.

Dr Padel, who is affiliated to Oxford University's School of Social and Cultural Anthropology, illustrated his lecture with memorable photographs of some of the funeral pyres at the city of Varanasi on the Ganges, and described the recent cremation

of his own wife, a Hindu, after she died in a road accident in India last year.

In her lecture, Shahin Bekhradnia (who as well as being principal organiser of the Kenneth Kirkwood Lecture



By contrast with Christian burial, burning became the customary punishment for heretics and witches from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. (*Burning of the Knights Templar, Paris, 1314*)

Social anthropologist Dr Felix Padel traced the history of funeral pyres from Ancient Greece and Rome (the word pyre comes from the ancient Greek word for fire) through to the funeral rituals still practiced by many Hindus and Sikhs in India today, despite modern concerns about excessive carbon emissions and use of wood. For them the spectacle of a pyre is a potent symbol of death.

*"The very act of fire consuming human remains is viewed as purification. Cremation represents purification and transformation. There is a sense of merging with the elements. Anyone who has witnessed it will have found it very moving. – the sense of community coming together is very, very moving."*

Funeral pyres have occurred in other cultural settings too, for example the Romany or gypsy practice of setting fire to the caravan of someone who has died.

On the other hand, early Christians and Moslems have regarded cremation as a pagan rite that by-passes the day of judgement, when bodies that had been buried in the ground can rise from their graves.



Abandoned Dakhmeh or Tower of Silence in Yazd, Iran. (Photography by Nick Taylor)

Days is also Religious Affairs Spokesperson for the World Zoroastrian Organisation) described the Zoroastrian approach to death through the millennia.

To them fire is pure and powerful and is not customarily used in the disposal of the dead. Zoroastrians have a long history of being ecologically aware and 'keeping everything working' and having festivals – for example Water and Fire Festivals - to celebrate all aspects of nature and the elements.

In Iran the climate is dry and much of the terrain is made of shifting sand, so earth is valuable, and trees and vegetation scarce.

*"There is a concept of earth being important and sacred. We are here on this earth once. We don't know what happens later. So we have to be happy and we will be happy if we look after each other. The Zoroastrian's wish is to die with a good name. They have a matter-of-fact attitude to death. Don't follow dogma, fight negative forces, keep positivity at the forefront."*

Although certain ceremonies take place on set days

following a death to release the soul and commemorate an individual, practices concerning the actual disposal of remains have historically been driven mostly by practical concerns.

*“The only thing to do was put bodies far away from the living in enclosed structures open to the skies called Towers of Silence, leaving them exposed to the sun and other elements where the flesh could dry and bio-degrade naturally and be picked clean by vultures and wild dogs.”*

But with recent declines in vulture populations, and urban settlements encroaching further and further, the Zoroastrian community has had to start considering alternative solutions while at the same time trying to maintain its environmentally responsible stance.

Ghana expert Professor Malcom McLeod had been



The 'shot at dawn' soldier at the National Memorial Arboretum.

up their act' with regard to restitution claims – and the validity of some artefacts becomes difficult to prove - fantasy coffins are now being made direct for the modern collectors' market.

Douglas Davies, Professor in the Study of Religion and Director of the Centre for Death and Life Studies at Durham University, brought things right up to date with a lively talk on today's funeral options, and the changing moods and attitudes to death that have been seen in Britain

Photograph: © Douglas Davies

over the last two centuries.

Although mourning the deceased remains central to the process, the celebration of a life has increasingly become an accepted part of the death ritual during funerals, and there are growing signs that environmental concerns and the takeaway culture are finding their way into last rites



Coffin in the form of a lion, a beast with an obvious symbolism of power, displayed for sale in the maker's workshop.

due to present his thoughts on whether the popular cultural phenomenon of Accra Coffins should today be considered artefacts, art or just 'expensive tourist tat', but was unfortunately unable to attend. Jeremy MacClancy, Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford Brookes, using Professor McLeod's notes and slides presented on his behalf.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ghana was increasingly adopting the use of traditional wooden coffins, but then a market started to develop for brightly coloured 'fantasy coffins' that were carved designs relating to the profession or interests of the deceased. These would also be crafted to denote wealth and power.

Designs are often spectacular and colourful – eagles, fishes, guitars, cameras, pineapples, Coca Cola bottles, bars of chocolate to name but a few – and some of the coffins are even hired out and then 'vacated' and returned to funeral parlours for further use. The coffin in the Pitt Rivers' collection is of a shop front.

But as museums come under increasing pressure to 'clean



Newly made traditional and representational coffins displayed for sale outside the maker's workshop.

practices too.

A new process of dissolving bodies under pressure in an alkaline solution - rather than by traditional cremation - creates a greatly reduced carbon footprint; and there are now more than 350 eco-friendly woodland burial sites across the country. To satisfy modern demand for 'take and deliver' services, businesses have emerged that will collect a body direct from someone's home or a hospital, take it away for cremation and then return the ashes direct to their family.

The super-rich are exploring ways to be frozen and brought back to life when future technologies enable such things, and people are commissioning jewellers to make rings with stones made from their cremated pets.

This suggests that humans today may be increasingly trying to use the power of choice as a way of conquering the event itself.

**Nicky Moeran, Friend**

Sourced from Atlas Obscura

Photograph by David Stanley

# Amazônia



Men of the Zo-é tribe wearing traditional headdresses and wooden poturus that are held in place through piercings in their lower lips.

The Amazon rainforest is vast. It occupies about seven million square hectares that are mainly in Brazil. Its area is larger than the European Union and includes the many rivers fed from the rainfall on the Eastern side of the Ecuadorian and Peruvian Andes that drain into the Amazon. This massive river, which is some 6,400 kilometres long, reaches the Atlantic at Macalpa and drains five times more fresh water into the sea than any other river in the world. The unique ecosystem of the rainforest is inhabited by around a million indigenous people including more than a hundred tribes identified from the air but many as yet unvisited by non-indigenous groups.

'Amazônia', written by Sebastião Salgado and edited by his wife, Lélia Wanick Salgado, is an appropriately large book: it is 36x27x5 cm and weighs 3.5 kg. Its 530 pages include almost 400 full-page black and white photographs: these are divided into groups that focus on the scenery and on the tribes the Selgados visited. A fascinating essay describes the 6 years they spent exploring Amazonia: there are also detailed descriptions of the photographs together with essays on the various tribes and their customs. The book is wonderful to explore, but hard to do justice to in this short review.

The spectacular photographs of the scenery cover the rainforest, the mountains and, of particular interest, the 'aerial rivers'. These form from the water absorbed by tree roots and transpired by leaves as vapour, this condenses to form clouds, which move eastwards and release rain on a huge scale: the daily volume of water carried in the aerial river (~20 billion tons) exceeds that flowing from the Amazon into the sea (~17 billion tons).

Most of the book focuses on the ten tribes that Salgado visited with the help of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), who are responsible for their well-being. Each visit required substantial preparatory work and involved a group

of support staff to ensure complete independence from the indigenous people. The Selgados, the support staff and the members of FUNAI all hold these tribes in high regard and the book is dedicated to and celebrates them both as people and as guardians of the rainforest.

Each of the many tribes has its own culture and language but I can only mention two of them here. The front cover of this magazine shows a woman from the Yawanawá tribe of the Western Amazon wearing a feathered headdress. This tribe was reduced in the latter part of the last century to about 100 members by landowners who tried to make Christians of them. Some thirty years ago, an indigenous leader liberated them and set out to restore their traditional customs and values. Today, they number more than 1200

and are flourishing.

The Zo-é tribe live in the northern Amazon and first met white people in the 1980s. This isolated group has its own habits. Men and women believe that a couple should only have three children together and therefore, if either wants more, they take a new spouse. They also have a peaceable way of resolving personal conflicts: they defuse them by tickling!

This remarkable book is particularly important today as the Amazonian rainforest and its indigenous tribes are under threat: the Brazilian government is happy to see the trees cut down and the land so freed used for agriculture. As the book records the current state of Amazonia, it provides a marker against which the geographical and cultural effects of future assaults on the rainforest can be measured.

**Jonathan Bard, Friend**

Sebastião Salgado (2021) Amazônia. Taschen Press. £64.25 (Amazon). Images © Sebastião Salgado.



Part of the body of water connecting the Rio Negro with the Cuyuní River. The overlying clouds are part of the Amazonian aerial-river system.

# The Islamic 'Kiln rod'

The spread of Islam outside Arabia began after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632CE. It was extensive and rapid: within a century the Muslim state stretched from Spain to Central Asia - the Persian Sasanian empire was swept away and Byzantium stripped of its richest provinces. This extraordinary phenomenon took place, "in the full light of history" recorded by contemporary chroniclers.

The arrival of Islam is signalled in the archaeological record by the sudden appearance, alongside ubiquitous unglazed wares, of fine, glazed pottery. Though glazed pottery had a long history in ancient Egypt, and sporadically in Roman and Byzantine lands, glazed pottery was still being made in only one place across the vast area that became the Islamic empire: southern Iraq produced rough, glazed functional wares - mostly jars for storage and transport. But by the end of the ninth century fine, glazed tableware in a wide variety of styles was in full production in every major urban centre from Cordoba to Samarkand. The "how" and "why" of this spread, unremarked by contemporary writers, require explanation.

Clues to the "how" are surprising: at every glazed-pottery site, among the usual workshop debris are found quantities of curious unglazed clay rods. Mostly about 5cms in diameter and originally 50cms or so in length, they often bear splashes of glaze and bits of glazed pot. The rare surviving associated kilns show their function: rows of sockets set close together in the kiln walls allowed the rods to be inserted side by side to form shelves on which glazed pots could be stacked during firing. This is a very particular, indeed peculiar, method. Shelves of flat clay bats on columns have been used in many ceramic cultures, from Western Europe to China, but the "kiln-rod" is unique to the Islamic world. Long cantilevered clay shelves seem perverse (wouldn't they soften and bend during the firing?) but they evidently worked and were used over many centuries.

Glazed pottery manufacture was more complicated than



Bowl, tin-glazed earthenware with painting in blue and splashes of green Iraq; 9th century d. 20.2 cms Ashmolean Museum, Reitlinger Gift, 1978.2141 Abbasid period (AD 750- 1258)



Part of a mediaeval kiln rod, Iran, 18.5 x 5.5 cm. Fragments from a turquoise glazed pot still adhere to it.



Remains of early Islamic kilns Siraf, on the Persian Gulf, Iran. Sockets in the kiln walls allow rods to be inserted to form shelves on which glazed pots can be stacked for firing. Pots in the centre of the larger kiln were presumably stacked in more conventional ways.

the making of unglazed wares and required new skills: firstly in glass-making and colouring, and then in adjusting the glass to "fit" as a glaze. Additionally, glazed pots must be kept entirely separate in the kiln, otherwise the molten glaze will irreparably bond vessels together as they cool thus rendering them valueless. New stacking methods were needed.

Fine Islamic glazed pottery developed first in eighth century Egypt, where there was a long tradition of glass-making: transfer between the two crafts is not hard to imagine. But having no stacking methods nearby to copy, the potters had to invent a new method, hence their idiosyncratic kiln-rod.

Once invented, glazed pottery manufacture spread across the Islamic world, always alongside the specialised kiln-rods. This indicates that glazed pottery manufacture was carried by potters migrating from the central Islamic lands to rich provinces east and west, taking with them their particular methods. Styles of decoration might accompany them, but often local patterns developed: things that look quite different can share an underlying technology. This is the "how" of the spread of Islamic glazed pottery.

The question of "why" glazed pottery could suddenly be made profitably everywhere in an area nearly 4000 miles across is also linked to the rise of Islam. A key characteristic of the Islamic state was the growth of urban life: large cities developed, with immense populations, where trade and manufacturing became important as never before. The economy became monetarised: large numbers of people were paid in cash and wealth spread through a burgeoning "middle class".

Fine, glazed ceramics are precisely the sort of small luxury that catered to them: it was neither gold and silver of the elites, nor the unglazed or wooden wares of the poor. This new product was made possible by the invention of that archaeological oddity - the kiln rod.

**Oliver Watson**, Emeritus Professor of Islamic Art, Khalili Research Centre, Oriental Institute, University of Oxford

# Dancing with the Umbanda Gods



Figure 1. Umbanda altar with Oxum (left) and Pombagira (right).

If one were to film a *Toy Story* version in the Pitt Rivers, we would certainly have quite a lot of dancing objects. We're not thinking of the musical instruments section but of all the images that have been used in all sorts of rituals — from healing to weddings. Shortly before the pandemic stopped most field research, we finished data collection for a study on Umbanda, a religion that blends African Yoruba and Bantu religions with popular Catholicism, French spiritualism and Brazilian indigenous beliefs. The origins of its name are unclear, though some suggest that it derives from an Angolan dialect where it means 'art of healing'. We were particularly interested in studying the phenomenon that psychiatrists coined as 'possession' — which in Umbanda is often referred to as 'incorporation', i.e. receiving a spiritual entity in one's body. If one is used to thinking of religion as static rituals with meditative hymns accompanied by an organ and churches with few images, the Umbanda religion is a feast for the senses (see this short video we produced to give you an idea of the music and movement involved: <https://vimeo.com/430303432>).

The idea of receiving a spirit in one's body and losing the sense of one's usual self is not a psychiatric oddity but a common phenomenon reported in most cultures, including Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and Christian. The spirits we find in Umbanda are not demons or tricksters, but a pantheon of benevolent gods and spirits, both male and female, young and sensual to the very aged. Some of them have never been human, others have. In Figure 1, we see on the left an image that looks like the Virgin Mary: next to it there is a glass of water. On the right a dancing woman wearing red dress shows a naked leg: in front of her is a glass of red wine. The Virgin Mary image is also known as Oxum, a goddess known in the Yoruba religion as the ruler of waters and fertility. The woman in red is called Pomba Gira and she usually behaves in a lively, sensual, though also fierce manner — a sign that one is receiving her is that the medium laughs loudly when she arrives. She advises people on matters of relationships, work, and protection (both physical and spiritual). Suspended above these figures on the altar, one can see playing cards. These refer to the oracular activities generally undertaken by the leader of the group, Pai or Mãe de Santo. Although seashells were originally used to tell the future, playing or Tarot cards have



Figure 2. Umbanda altar with Iemanjá (left), Ogum (centre), and Oxalufã (right)

become very popular.

Mediums learn to channel various entities, and each is known to behave in a different way, or to carry particular objects. A Preto Velho (Old Black Man) walks with a limp; the Boiadeiro (Cow Herder) wears a long hat and enjoys dancing; the Erês (children spirits) jump vivaciously, crawl on the floor, and eat candy. Figure 2 shows Iemanjá, the goddess of water, dressed in blue; Ogum (at the centre) is the lord of iron and war and carries a sword or spear; Oxalufã (on the right), the oldest of the gods and co-creator of the world, walks with a hunched back and speaks slowly.

Umbanda sessions can go on for hours, with mediums incorporating a succession of entities. In the early to middle 20th century psychiatrists described these religious behaviours as primitive, irrational, and potentially pathological. Religious possession is no longer considered an illness of the mind, if it's culturally accepted. But even in Brazil, where the majority of the population is Christian, it's not exactly mainstream — and the growth of Evangelical groups has led to countless episodes of violence towards Umbanda and other Afro-Brazilian religions, as Evangelicals perceive those possession states to be demonic. The truth is that our theories of how the mind works aren't very helpful in understanding non-ordinary states of mind, such as having one's identity replaced by that of a spirit. Our recent work on the mental health, personality and cognition of mediums show that they are no different from other Brazilians who have never experienced possession states. More interestingly, we found that those mediums who are better at letting go of their own self when the spirit 'takes over' have higher levels of wellbeing than other mediums who feel they are more in control. Perhaps this is a sign that the gods favour those who embrace them without hesitation?

**Miguel Farias**, Associate Professor and the leader of the *Brain, Belief, & Behaviour Lab* at the *Institute of Peace, Security, & Social Justice*, Coventry University.

**Roma Delmonte**, PhD student at the same institution.

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# Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters



Yarrkalpa (Hunting Ground) painted by members of the Martumili Artists (2013). Acrylic on linen, 3 X 5 metres.

**S**onglines: Tracking the Seven Sisters is a major exhibition of contemporary indigenous Australian art and artefacts that was first shown in Canberra, then Plymouth, and has now moved on to Berlin and Paris. Viewing the displays is a wonderful experience that lifts the spirit even if one has only minimal understanding, but much more can be gained through a better knowledge of the meaning of the works. This is one of the exhibition's aims, through displayed information and by in-depth articles in the comprehensive catalogue. Another aim was to educate young indigenous people, nowadays increasingly distracted by modern technology at the expense of attachment to their own identity.

The word "Songlines" was invented by Europeans to describe Tjukurpa, "our Dreaming creation law"<sup>1</sup>. The Dreaming has been described by European anthropologists as "a major religious system"<sup>2</sup> and as "sacred"<sup>3</sup>. Creation stories are embedded in the artistic tradition and in ceremonial song and dance (inma) of the people whose ancestors populated the Australian landmass some 60,000 years ago. They were descended from humans who left Africa many centuries before the groups who populated other parts of the globe, so their cultural traditions and beliefs are unique. As the indigenous Australian Muta explained to anthropologist WEH Stanner, "White man got no dreaming, him go 'nother way". The metaphysical differences between the Anangu (indigenous Australian) and the Western way of thinking is inherent in their languages, which have no words for "history" or "time"<sup>4</sup>. The ancestral beings who created the land and all living things are still in existence, continuously morphing their form, species and character (both good and bad).

Songlines are stories that are told, sung, performed and painted. They describe the creation and nature of the terrain, including water-holes, edible plants and animals, and where the ancestors are. They are "owned" and inherited by specific groups and individuals. The songline of the Seven Sisters, 'Minyipuru' or 'Kungkarrangkalpa' is one of the longest, extending across many miles of country and having several variations. It describes their flight from the lustful man Yurla (Wati Nyiru), depicted in the exhibition by models made of Spinifex and other local grasses. The painting illustrated here, Yarrkalpa (Hunting Ground), is a topographic replica of the land around Parnngurr, painted by a group of Martu women, seated on the ground around the linen "canvas" (shown as a video in the exhibition). An explanatory map alongside the painting, and as a transparent overlay in the catalogue, interprets the usefulness of each area, e.g. "waterhole", "good for tracking goanna" (a potential food), and locates the presence of ancestral beings, e.g. "Yurla watching the Minyipuru".

This wonderful exhibition is a joyful celebration of an ancient culture that was in danger of being lost. It was retrieved just in time for some of the people who had learnt their traditional knowledge when young to pass it on through their art. Muuki Taylor, a senior lawman and artist who grew up walking with his family across the Great Sandy Desert, didn't meet white people until the 1960s. He had an important role: to protect the cultural appropriateness of the exhibits.

The greatly improved intercultural respect between "whitefellas" and "blackfellas" enabled the collaboration that was essential to creating this exhibition. It has also affected the artists working today: they have happily embraced modern methods and materials, such as acrylic paint and museums, enabling them to display their unique inheritance with honour and pride to outsiders while maintaining their own cultural integrity.

**Gillian Morriss-Kay, Friend**

Quotations from the Songlines catalogue: 1. Inawinytji Williamson, senior law woman, traditional owner of the Seven Sisters songline; 2. Mike Smith; 3. Bill Neidjie, philosopher and elder. 4. From Essays by WEH Stanner (1979).



Below: The Seven Sisters and Yurla (far right). Life-size models created from native grasses and various "found materials" by members of the Tjanpi Desert Weavers.

Photos taken by Gillian Morriss-Kay

# INFORMATION SHEET

The Friends' Magazine is published three times a year

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Family (two adults and all their children  
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Over 65: £20 (Joint: £30); Student: £15 (18-25,  
in full time education).

### President of Friends of Pitt Rivers:

Professor Chris Gosden

### Patrons of Friends of Pitt Rivers:

Alexander Armstrong, Danby Bloch,  
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Open: Tuesday-Sunday 10.00 - 17.00

Monday 12.00- 17.00

Admission FREE.

**Refreshments.** The Horsebox Coffee  
Company on the lawn is open from 9.00 -  
17.00 daily, serving hot and cold drinks and  
homemade cakes. With delicious locally  
roasted coffee, scrumptious brownies,  
flapjacks and cookies, the Horsebox Café is  
the perfect place for a coffee break!

### After Hours

Occasional themed evening events.

**All museum events:** see [www.prm.web.ox.ac.uk/events](http://www.prm.web.ox.ac.uk/events)

### Magazine

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those of the Museum. All contributors to the  
Magazine are Friends unless otherwise stated.

For further information see:

[www.prm.web.ox.ac.uk/events](http://www.prm.web.ox.ac.uk/events)

### Deaths

Sheila Paine, aged 92. Professor Keith  
Dyke, aged 85. Mrs CP Hinchliff.

## MUSEUM DIARY DATES

The Museum is open and pre-booking  
is no longer required. Visitors are  
strongly encouraged to wear face  
coverings when in the Museum and  
there are hand sanitiser points around  
the galleries for the use of visitors and  
staff.

We look forward to welcoming you.

### Exhibitions and case displays

**Installation Upper Gallery**

**Until 25 September 2022**

#### Dwelling: In this space we breathe

An exhibition of 9  
silkscreen prints by  
Gambian-British artist  
Khadija Saye who uses  
amulets, beads and  
horns to explore her  
connection to spiritual  
practices.



Silkscreen print by Khadija  
Saye

#### Archive Case first floor

**Until 31 August 2022**

#### Footprints in the Sands of time

A display of  
photographs relating  
to the life and work of  
archaeologist O.G.S.  
Crawford (1886-1957)



Sand Dune

#### Special Exhibition

#### Gallery

**Until 8 March 2022**

#### Beyond the Binary

This co-curated  
exhibition is  
about queer lived  
experiences,  
putting the voices  
of LGBTIAQ+  
communities at the heart, connecting their  
voices to you.



Non-binary bow tie.

#### PRM Website

#### Digital available

#### Weaving Connections:

An online exhibition  
from the Jenny Balfour-  
Paul collection with  
perspectives of Multaka  
volunteers.



Detail of embroidery from  
Asherah nauak (bridal tunic)  
(2018.37.42)

## FRIENDS' DIARY DATES

Future talks will be held in person and  
on Zoom. Information on accessing  
these talks is provided to Friends via  
electronic communication from the  
Pitt Rivers Museum. An easy way to  
watch and enjoy the speakers from the  
comfort of your home!

### 2022

#### Talk: Romanian Life, masquerade traditions and customs

**Wednesday 18 May**

**2022, 18.00**

**Celia Ward**

A talk about the New  
Year, ancient but  
ongoing tradition of  
Masquerade in North  
East Romania and its  
relationship to village  
life in communist  
and post-communist  
Romania. The talk  
will be illustrated with  
photos of masquerades and paintings  
and drawings the speaker made while in  
Romania from 2002 - 2005.



Watercolour by Celia  
Ward

#### FPRM Party

#### Japan in Wytham Wood

**Sunday 29 May**

**2022, 11.00**

A celebratory day on  
the theme of Japan  
with Robin Wilson  
and the Anagama  
Kiln opening. An  
especially created  
improvised Japanese  
dance by Café Reason Butoh Dance  
Theatre. A demonstration of a traditional  
tea ceremony. Food will be a sushi style.  
Details to follow.  
Tickets: Friends £30pp Non Friends £35pp.



#### Talk: Undreamed Shores

**Wednesday 21 September 2022, 18.00**

Fran Larson speaks about her book and the  
lives of the five women in it who collected  
for the PRM.

#### Talk: Ethiopic scriptures

**Wednesday 19 October 2022, 18.00**

Mai Musie and Cesaur Merchan-Hamann  
speak about their research on the Ethiopic  
scriptures in the Bodleian Library.

Further information, please contact  
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