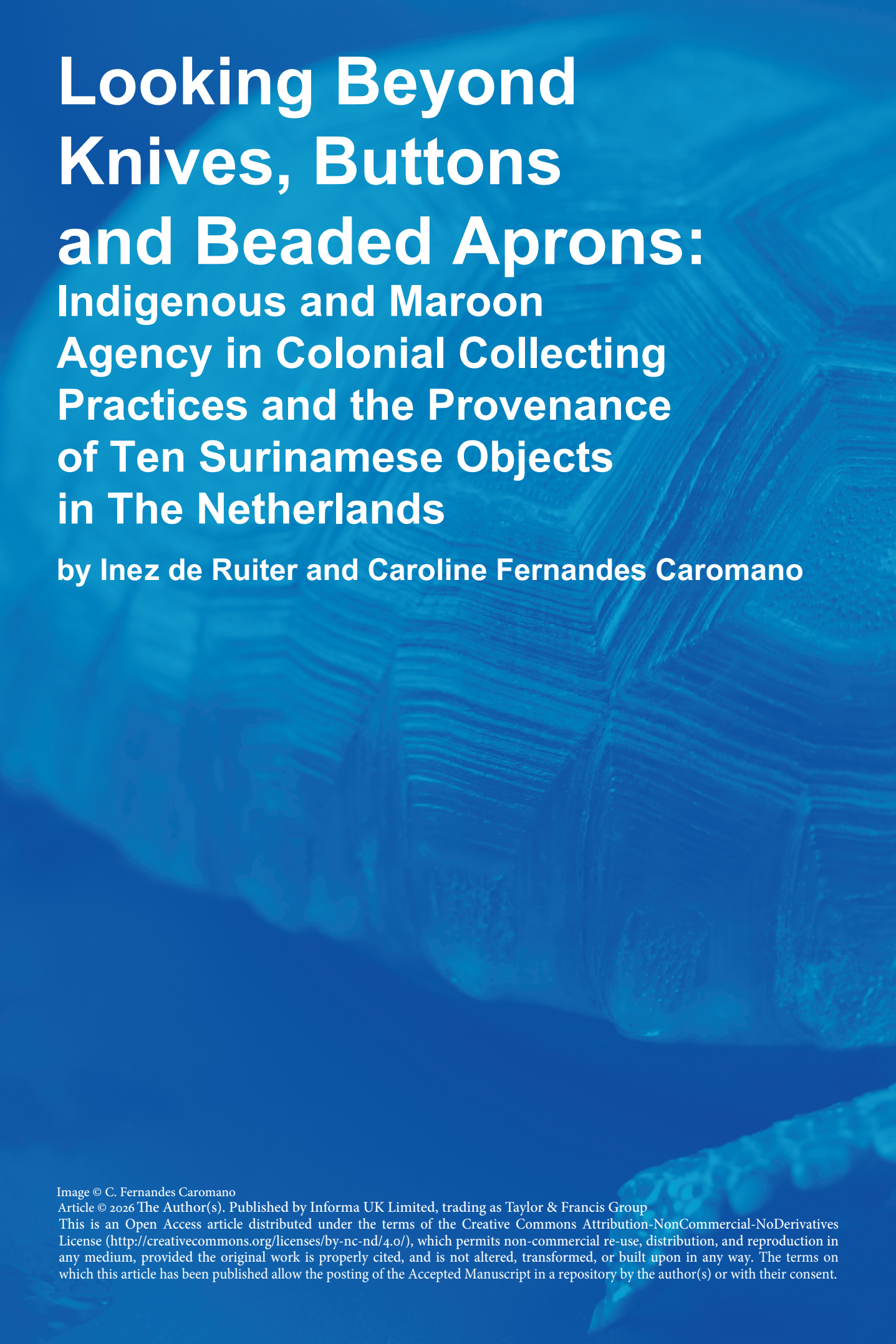




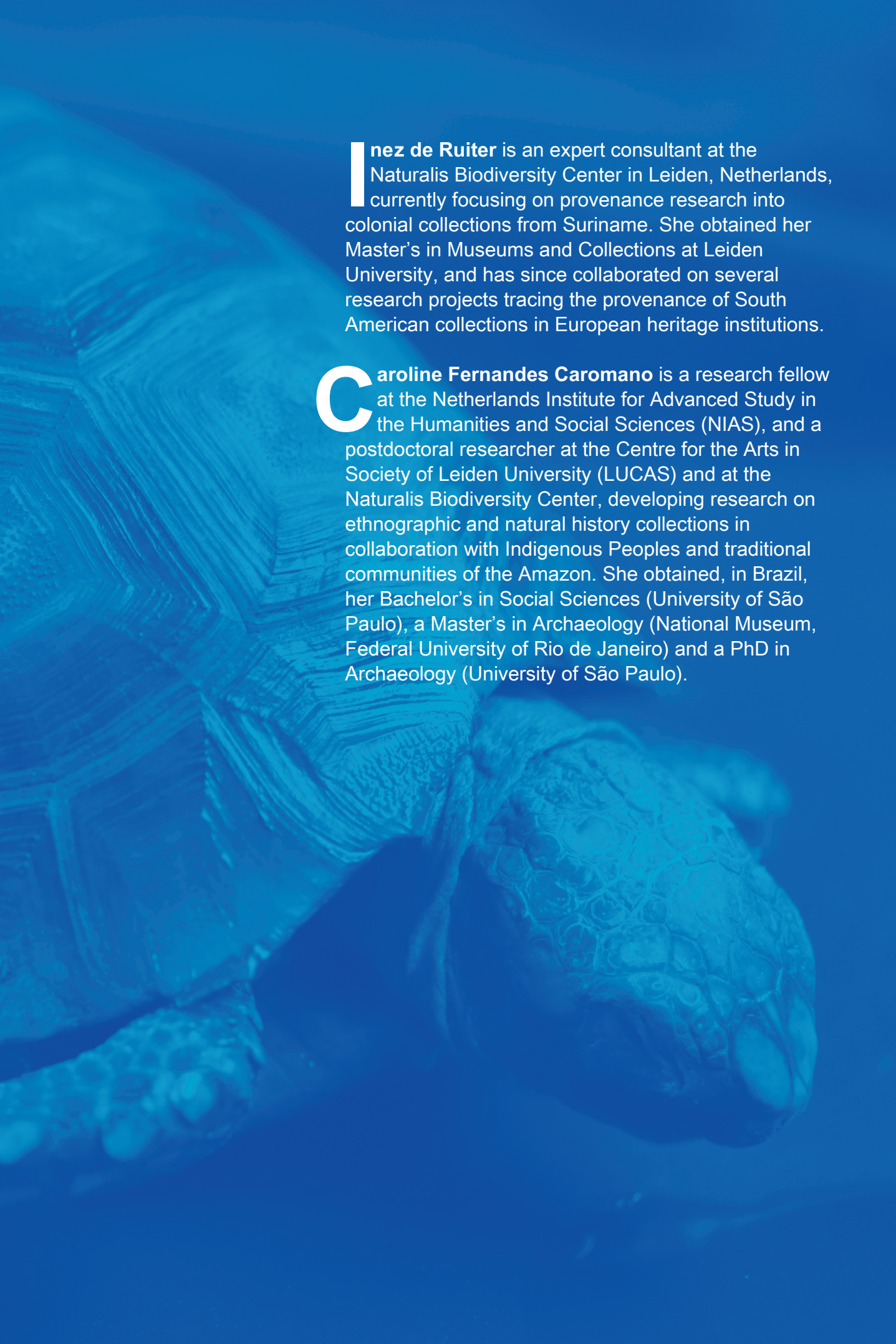
Looking Beyond Knives, Buttons and Beaded Aprons: Indigenous and Maroon Agency in Colonial Collecting Practices and the Provenance of Ten Surinamese Objects in The Netherlands

by Inez de Ruiter and Caroline Fernandes Caromano

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What does it mean to collect a culture, and who has the authority to decide what is taken? This question lies at the heart of the discussion regarding the provenance of material culture acquired during three major expeditions commissioned by the Koninklijk Nederlands Aardrijkskundig Genootschap [KNAG, Royal Dutch Geographical Society] to Dutch-occupied Suriname at the turn of the twentieth century. As part of a broader colonial effort to fill in the so-called ‘blank

spaces’ on European maps, Dutch explorers undertook the Gonini (1903–1904), Tapanahoni (1904) and Toemoekhoemak (1907) expeditions (Wentholt 2003).

While these Dutch colonial expeditions to Suriname were primarily intended to map the colony’s territory and borders and collect local natural specimens to support scientific production and potential economic exploitation, they also ended up amassing material culture from the Wayana and Trio Peoples (Mulder 2022; de Ruiter *et al.* 2025), raising critical questions about agency, representation and the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange.

The Dutch leaders of the Gonini (1903) and Tapanahoni (1904) expeditions included Alphons Franssen Herderschee (military general and expedition leader), Gerard Versteeg (botanist and zoologist) and Claudius Henricus de Goeje (cartographer, linguist and anthropologist). The Toemoekhoemak (1907) expedition marked the return of C. H. de Goeje, this time accompanied by Harmen Bisschop van Tuinen (naval officer).

Unfamiliar with the natural landscapes and social contexts of Suriname, the Dutch recruited local labourers, including a significant number of Surinamese Maroons – descendants of enslaved Africans who had escaped captivity and formed communities in the hinterlands. These Maroons acted as guides, porters and translators, facilitating communication with Indigenous Wayana and Trio communities encountered during the expeditions. Indigenous individuals also participated as guides, hunters and translators. Trade of goods was facilitated by various intermediaries, most notably Maroon labourers and Indigenous *tamouchi* [chiefs], who played a central role in enabling contact and negotiation between Dutch expedition members and local communities (de Ruiter *et al.* 2025, p. 27, for the specific context of the studied expeditions; Gallois 1986 and Barbosa 2007, for in-depth comprehension of the ‘relational networks in the Guianas’ and the circulation of goods).

Despite their critical roles in the success of these expeditions’ outcomes, the contributions of these two marginalised groups have largely been overlooked in Western scientific accounts (de Ruiter *et al.* 2025). The expeditions resulted in the acquisition of significant ethnographic collections, now housed in the Wereldmuseum, and natural history collections, housed at the Naturalis Biodiversity Center, both in the Netherlands.

Provenance research into these collections provides valuable insights into the processes that governed the acquisition of colonial objects. Some items were obtained through trade and coercion, and others were specifically commissioned by the Dutch and crafted by Indigenous individuals to increase the quality of the collections.

Our aim is to unravel the multidimensional stories behind these objects, revealing the diverse methods of acquisition employed within the same expeditions and by the same individuals. This analysis challenges the conventional tendency to categorise colonial collections into a single mode of acquisition; instead, it highlights the fluid and dynamic power relationships involved. As a result, each object tells a story of complex, and often contradictory, colonial collecting practices.

By examining the provenance of ten specific objects, this paper argues that Indigenous and Maroon Peoples involved in the expeditions in question, frequently exerted significant influence and agency over which materials were collected and how they were acquired. This analysis aligns with a corpus of research that has been demonstrating how, in Suriname (Duin 2014; Duin 2020; Rybka 2022; de Ruiter *et al.* 2025) and other Dutch colonial contexts (Weber 2019; Kananoja 2021; Alcantara-Rodriguez *et al.* 2024; Vellinga *et al.* 2024), the agency of Indigenous and Maroon individuals contributed to knowledge-making processes, shaping both the collections and their peoples’ own self-representation, offering a more nuanced perspective on their role in these contexts.



Fig. 1. Wayana necklaces made with local and non-native seeds and European glass beads, Wereldmuseum: a) TM-402-151. © Wereldmuseum; b) TM-403-62. © C. Fernandes Caromano; c) TM-401-28. © C. Fernandes Caromano

Tracing object histories

This study was inspired by the growing importance of provenance research in the Netherlands over the last decade, which resulted in the launch of an advisory report by the Dutch Council for Culture (Raad voor Cultuur 2020) and in multi-institutional research programmes (such as Pressing Matter and Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era, abbreviated as PPROCE) with a focus on the specificities of provenance research of collections from colonial contexts (Mooren *et al.* 2022). Our research uses the direct analysis of material culture and historical primary sources to delve into the provenance of ten Wayana and Trio objects collected during the colonial KNAG expeditions (1903-1907) within Amazonian Suriname.

The objects analysed have varied histories and uses; they include body ornaments, ritual artefacts and botanical and zoological specimens. The narratives under scrutiny are derived from a diverse array of historical sources that document these expeditions, such as official reports published in the journal *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* (New West Indian Guide), diaries penned by expedition members and selected correspondence kept at the Wereldmuseum and Leiden University Libraries. A critical reading of these sources was done to shed light on the Indigenous and Maroon Peoples encountered throughout the expeditions, and the context in which the ethnographic collections were acquired. Additionally, a rich digital archive of photographs taken

during the expedition, dispersed across the Wereldmuseum collection and the Leiden University Digital Archives, was explored. These visual records, besides being objects themselves (Bärnighausen *et al.* 2020), often serve to complement and, at times, contradict the narratives found in reports and diaries as they contextualise the events and individuals mentioned therein.

[T]he agency of Indigenous and Maroon individuals contributed to knowledge-making processes, [...] offering a more nuanced perspective on their role in these contexts.

Collecting Indigenous artefacts

Object 1: Akka wakta

A notable object collected during the Tapanahoni expedition is the *akka wakta* (TM-402-151, Fig. 1a), a necklace of small brown glass beads currently housed in the Wereldmuseum. It was collected on 3 October 1904, when de Goeje noted in his diary that he had ‘acquired a string of light brown beads obtained by the Aparai from the Kalajuas [white people] of the lower Paroe [Brazil]’ (1904b, p. 6). This remark points to active trading routes between the Aparai and non-Indigenous Brazilians, revealing a broader network of exchange in the Guianas and Amazon basin. It also illustrates how colonial expeditions intersected with pre-existing relational networks in the region, characterised by the exchange of goods and movement of peoples.

Earlier, on 22 September, de Goeje mentioned that ‘in the company there is an Aparai, from the Sitaré, and later identified him as Elekoemai. On 4 October, he recorded: ‘the Aparai Elekoemai comes to have a chat with me. This is in Ojana, which language he speaks fluently’. It is likely that the necklace originally belonged to him, since de Goeje further noted that Elekoemai had travelled to Brazil with his father. The Kalajuas, he wrote, were ‘white in colour like me, good, and wear white coats’.

Although de Goeje does not detail how the necklace was acquired, the context suggests it was likely traded. His interaction with Elekoemai seems amicable, but de Goeje’s limited fluency in Wayana at the time and the colonial framing of his diary require a cautious reading.

The necklace also illustrates how European presence and materials reshaped Amazonian material culture. For instance, after their introduction, glass beads gradually became integrated into the cultural practices of the Guianas region (Scaramelli and Scaramelli 2005). Compared to the traditional labour-intensive methods of sourcing and preparing seeds, shells, or bones, glass beads were easier and less time-consuming to work with. Again, such objects reveal the extent of European trade with Indigenous communities across the Amazonian interior. In fact, the necklace of glass beads now present in the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam was originally manufactured in Brazil, passed through Indigenous trade routes, was then collected by the Dutch and eventually attributed to Indigenous Surinamese heritage.



Fig. 2a) Wayana beaded apron (TM-402-217).
© Wereldmuseum



Fig. 2b) Trio apron made with seed beads (TM-402-223).
© Wereldmuseum

Objects 2 and 3: Necklaces of seeds and beads

Other necklaces collected during these expeditions also demonstrate hybrid material practices, combining traditional seed techniques with European glass beads, such as TM-403-62 (Fig. 1b) and TM-401-28 (Fig. 1c). The latter, a necklace collected from the Wayana (likely in the town of Yamaiké) during the Gonini Expedition (1903), includes seeds of the *Ormosia* sp., or *onosue* in Wayana language (de Goeje 1906) – a plant native to the Guianas and commonly used in Indigenous ornaments – interspersed with small blue translucent glass beads.

Int intriguingly, the museum catalogue refers to this object as a '[n]ecklace of seeds used by Wayana Winti dancers – Onosoeé. The label 'Wayana Winti dancers' raises important questions. Winti is a spiritual tradition practiced among Afro-Surinamese communities, rooted in a blend of religious systems from West and Central Africa that were brought to Suriname through the transatlantic slave trade (Price 1990). This means attributing the necklace to 'Wayana Winti dancers' may reflect a misinterpretation on the part of the collector or museum or possibly input from Maroon workers when identifying materials amassed during the expedition. It could even be evidence of historical cultural interactions between Indigenous and Maroon communities in Suriname.

Similarly, the other necklace (Fig. 1b), collected from the Wayana during the 1907 Toemoekhoemak expedition, is composed of two strands with tricolour (white, blue and pink) glass

beads, one strand with blue glass beads and one strand with *Coix lacrymajobi* seeds (Kaki 2023) – known by the Wayana as *sampire* (de Goeje 1906, p. 92) – separated by white glass beads, strung along palm fibre cords joined by a knot. The delicate composition of this ornament demonstrates the introduction, circulation and adoption of exotic European goods (glass beads) by the Indigenous Peoples of Suriname. In addition, the presence of *Coix lacrymajobi* seeds, of Asian origin, tells a story of colonial expansion, the transport of plants and their introduction to different continents. It shows that provenance research is not only concerned with where and how an object was collected, but also with the layered histories of cultural interaction and transformation embedded in its materials.

Object 4: Kwejoe (Wayana)

A beaded apron [*kwejoe*], TM-402-217 (Fig. 2a), is attributed to the Wayana and features bands of white, blue and purple European glass beads arranged around a central meandering motif. This pattern may correspond to the design known as *mekuwat kililin* or *meku wililin*, meaning 'tip of the monkey's tail' (van Velthem and van Velthem Linke 2010; Kulijaman and Déléage 2016). However, according to de Goeje's encyclopaedia (1906) and the sketch in his diary (De Goeje 1904b), the linear elements of the apron are referred to as *pena*, the meandering motif as *pašimekun* and the fringe as *umot*. De Goeje acquired it on 3 October 1904 in Wayana territory and described it in his diary as a 'precious addition' because 'such aprons were increasingly rare, with most women wearing simpler aprons made of European cotton' (de Goeje 1904b, p. 4).

Ac curator's note specifies that this *kwejoe* belonged to the 'wife of Pontoetoe', whom de Goeje identifies in his diary as Petamani. In his 4 October diary entry accompanying the sketch, de Goeje used the term 'exchanged', implying a barter transaction, although we do not know what Petamani received in return.

Object 5: Kwejoe (Trio)

By contrast, the *kwejoe* with inventory number TM-402-223 (Fig. 2b) is attributed to the Trio and is made of manually cut and polished beads of palm endocarps (possibly *Astrocaryum* sp.), with a fringe of seeds (*Astrocaryum* sp. and *Protium* sp.) and shells. It was collected in the village of Majoli – named after its *tamouchi* [chief] – the only Trio settlement visited by the 1904 expedition. The payment for this apron, two bunches of beads and a mirror, was explicitly negotiated and documented, unlike in the case of Petamani's apron. Although the wearer remains unnamed, the recorded process reveals that the Trio were not simply subjects of extraction, but participants in structured exchanges that recognised the value of their items.

The differences between these two aprons are noteworthy. The Wayana example, composed of imported glass beads, reflects the proximity to coastal trade networks, possibly intermediated by Maroons, and a higher degree of material incorporation of European goods. The Trio *kwejoe*, manufactured with hand-cut seeds and palm endocarps, exemplifies traditional techniques employed prior to the introduction and adoption of European glass beads, and which persisted post-contact. These contrasts could signal differing levels of access to European materials or distinct aesthetic choices made by the artisans. What both cases illustrate,

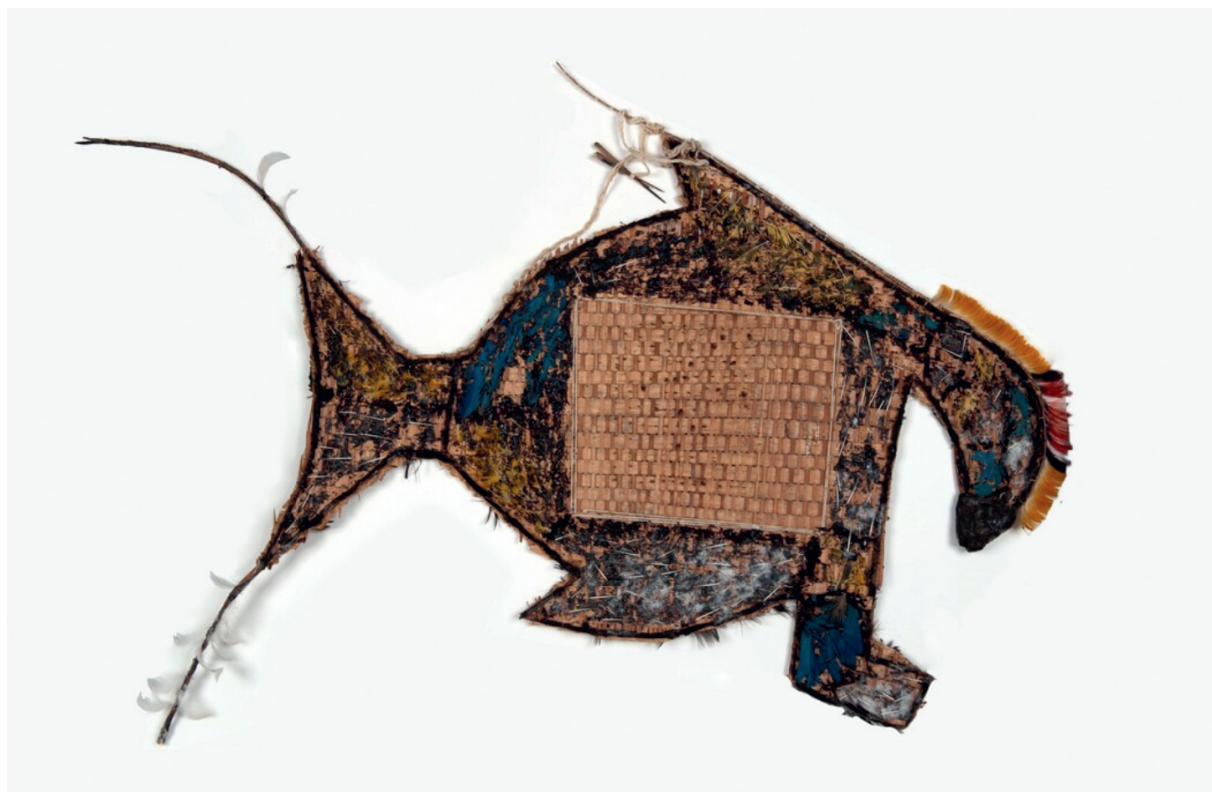


Fig. 3. One of the *koenana* collected during Toemoekhoemak Expedition, Wereldmuseum: TM-403-159. © Wereldmuseum

however, is the active role of Indigenous intermediaries, especially Toewoli, in shaping the outcomes of these exchanges. The objects were not looted; rather, they were valued and traded in negotiations shaped by longstanding local relational networks. In this sense, both aprons testify to the nuanced ways Indigenous communities navigated and influenced colonial collecting practices.

Object 6: *Koenana*

In the final days of the 1907 Toemoekhoemak expedition, C. H. de Goeje and his team began their return to Paramaribo after months of mapping southern Suriname and collecting ethnographic materials. Among the feathered ornaments, cotton garments and necklaces that reflected an interest in adornments, they encountered something far more layered: a ceremony.

At Popokai village, de Goeje witnessed a ritual unlike anything else on the journey, one that revealed how his collected objects were used in context. There, he acquired four *koenana* (Fig. 3): woven mats used in an initiation ceremony involving ant or wasp stings, a test of endurance that marked the transition from childhood to adulthood. 'As night fell', de Goeje wrote, 'drums and *pagalen* [woven boxes] were brought out' and men adorned in feathers and cotton began the *tapsém* dance.

The *koenana* were sacred objects, worn during the painful sting ritual and embedded in the community's ceremonial life. Three ceremonial masters, Makot, Sili and Ololi, are mentioned by name and seemed to have guided the process whilst participating in the rite. The mats were applied to children as young as six, but also to adults, and sometimes even pressed against unsuspecting passers-by to the amusement of onlookers (de Goeje 1908, pp. 143-149).

De Goeje later noted that the team 'exchanged whatever ethnographica could be obtained, including one of the *oloks* and all the *koenanas*' (de Goeje 1908, p. 149). Again, the conditions of this exchange – and what was traded for the objects – remain unclear, since what de Goeje classified as 'exchange' was embedded in a colonial system of economic and cultural appropriation which did not necessarily consider the impact of collecting culturally sensitive materials from the Indigenous villages visited. Today, these four *koenana* reside in the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam.

As debates on restitution intensify, the story of these *koenana* shows that studying the provenance of museum collections is more than a transactional record: it is a lens into social life, belief systems and memory that offers meaning and context to material

culture. When rituals fade from practice, objects like these become archives of living culture whose biographies extend beyond ownership to collective identity. Understanding the ceremonial role of such objects reframes their removal as not just collection, but rupture. Reconnecting these objects to their stories strengthens calls for repatriation – not due to guilt, but out of recognition.

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Object 7: *Waipu*

During the Gonini expedition, there was one notable example of the Dutch using coercion to assert their dominance when securing certain prized objects. The incident involved a pair of *waipu* – cotton-fringed bands used tied below the knees, characteristic of Wayana attire – acquired in the town of Panapi (TM-401-40a, Fig. 4a).

On 18 December 1903, Gerard Versteeg recorded in his diary:

We had the most trouble with their knee ligaments. They consist of a 2.5-centimetre-wide strap with 20-centimetre-long fringes on it. Naturally red from the ruku. These ligaments are put on young and then remain in place, so that they give a certain deformity of the knees. They are exchanged for new ones only a few times. No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't get any waipoes at first. In the afternoon we got them from the young man who accompanied us to the Kn. [Knopaiamoi]. He was laughed at, but didn't mind [...] exchanging them seems to be frowned upon. The things were so tight I could barely get a knife under the strap and I still cut him. A plaster made everything right again. (Versteeg 2019, p. 173)

This account is corroborated by the diary of de Goeje, who wrote the following day:

Another thing, however, we could not so easily master, viz. a pair of waipoes or leg bands. These are woven around the leg above the calf and can only be removed by cutting loose. Against another pruning shear we got a pair. (de Goeje 1903, p. 25)

The specific importance of obtaining a set of *waipu* remains unclear, but since the diaries provide little insight into why this item was so coveted, it can be inferred that the expedition team sought to collect every piece of traditional Wayana attire for display.

Versteeg mentioned acquiring the knee bands from a young man who guided the team to the top of Knopaiamoi rock. Earlier in his diary, he notes: 'Since we don't have enough crew, the two Indians from Jamaiké will go with us [to Knopaiamoi], along with two from here [Panapi] (Oelatta and Copie)' (Versteeg

2019, p. 137). Given that the knee bands were collected in Panapi, it is reasonable to assume they belonged to either Oelatta or Copie, who then received a pair of shears in return. Through the direct observation of the cotton bands, it is possible to recognise a cut mark on the fabric, reinforcing the diaries' accounts of how it was removed from the legs of its owner.

When examining the photographic collection produced primarily by Versteeg during the expedition, the *waipu* bands described in the diaries are clearly visible, wrapped around the knees of Panapi's inhabitants. Notably, however, one man consistently appears without these straps (center on Fig. 4b). While it would be speculative to assert with certainty that this individual was either Oelatta or Copie, it remains a compelling detail and invites further reflection.

This observation highlights the valuable role that photographic collections can play in enhancing the contextualisation of provenance research (Deußen 2022). In the broader context of provenance research, the objective extends beyond identifying colonial biases or supporting restitution efforts; it also centres on restoring agency to the real, complex individuals behind the collections (van Beurden 2024). Due to pervasive colonial biases, their names and identities have often been lost to history or obscured within fragmented primary sources. However, where photographic evidence survives, it becomes significantly easier to reconnect faces, peoples, histories and stories to heritage collections that have long been disconnected and displaced.

During the Tapanahoni expedition (1904), the team brought back two more sets of *waipu*, TM-402-184 and TM-402-185¹ from the Wayana town Tuwoli (named after its *tamouchi*). These belonged to Matanaoeloe, the wife of Tuwoli, and Kono, one of Tuwoli's *peitos* [dependents], but there is no way to know which set is whose. Unlike the Gonini expedition, the primary sources do not mention instances of coercion, but they also do not provide any detailed information about the conditions under which they were acquired. The inventory card for TM-402-184 states that 'these strips, cut from the leg, belonged to the Oepoeroeis [Wayana]', suggesting a similar acquisition technique to the *waipu* collected during the Gonini expedition. On Monday 3 October, de Goeje wrote that he exchanged 'an old kamisa [cotton

loincloth] for a new one, and two old waipus from Matanaoeloe, Toewoli's wife, for a good one'. These excerpts corroborate the account from the Gonini expedition, in which Versteeg wrote that the only instance in which these *waipu* are removed is when they are exchanged for a new pair. Perhaps the change in collection technique shows that the team had learned that this was the best way to acquire *waipu*, so as not to leave the person without a set. Such an account can also indicate that local populations had agency over what they wished to receive in return for their objects.

Object 8: *Olok*

Another way the Dutch expedition team expanded the ethnographic collection was by commissioning objects. During the Tapanahoni Expedition (1904), de Goeje acquired an *olok* (Fig. 5c), a large feathered headdress traditionally worn during ceremonial occasions (de Goeje 1906). This particular one was specially made for him by Pontoetoe (Fig. 5a), a Wayana *tamouchi* [chief] who participated in both the Tapanahoni (1904) and Toemoekhoemak (1907) expeditions. Towards the end of the Tapanahoni expedition, de Goeje also noted that Pontoetoe had named his newborn son Tëkujennë, a phonetic rendering of 'de Goeje' in Wayana pronunciation (de Goeje 1904b, p. 45), suggesting a relationship marked by mutual respect – or, at the very least, shaped by the complex dynamics of alliance and exchange between Indigenous leaders and colonial agents.

In his diary, de Goeje describes the acquisition of the headdress:

I will talk for a while and then express my wishes regarding the exchange. Pontoetoe will prepare an *olok* (dance crown) completely for me. He takes out his feather pager – and it turns out to be completely full of beautiful dance jewellery. [...] They prepare the *olok* and meanwhile the workers come, and I seize bananas and all sorts of other things. Then we go to the waterfront to collect payment. For the beautiful *olok* I give an axe, hammer, beads, buttons and shirt, and for some other feathers, a pair of trousers. Pontoetoe thinks I'm stingy; this shark must have imagined he could give me a good push. He doesn't count the fact that I gave him plaster and other gifts. The sale being closed, it's dinner time. (de Goeje 1904b, pp. 71-72)



Fig. 4a) Wayana *waipu* used by Oelatta or Copie, object TM-401-40a. © Wereldmuseum



Fig. 4b) 'Indianen te Panapie in Maronwijnje' [Indians at Panapi in Marowijne]. © Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 93949, Gonini Expedition, 1903

The passage gives us a glimpse into the world of Wayana craftsmanship; the dance crown was assembled using feathers and other components kept in storage. Interestingly, de Goeje also writes that Pontoetoe was not pleased with the amount he was paid for the *olok*, although he does not elaborate on what Pontoetoe was expecting in return, and quickly vilifies Pontoetoe as greedy, reflecting a common colonial tendency to diminish Indigenous valuation of their labour and cultural production.

Today, the Wereldmuseum holds one *olok* identified as having been collected during the Tapanahoni expedition (TM-402-40, Fig. 5c). However, it appears to be incomplete. In his ethnographic encyclopaedia, de Goeje (1906) includes an illustration of a complete *olok* (Fig. 5b), which clearly shows that several components are missing from the version currently in the museum's collection. Interestingly, these missing parts are held by the museum but have been catalogued separately under generic terms such as 'dance ornament'. These include TM-402-458 (Fig. 5d), TM-403-170 (Fig. 5e), TM-402-62 and TM-402-456.

Notably, TM-403-170 (Fig. 5e) has been attributed by the museum to the Toemoekhoemak expedition of 1907, while the *olok* and the other related components were collected during the Tapanahoni expedition in 1904. This raises important questions about the accuracy of the cataloguing process, the circumstances surrounding the *olok*'s disassembly and whether this element was in fact part of the original. The inventory cards associated with these objects indicate that the *olok* and its various components, already disassembled,

were gifted to the Wereldmuseum (Amsterdam) by the Ministerie van Koloniën Den Haag [Ministry of Colonies The Hague] in 1927; this is also the case for the other objects discussed in this article. The documentation explicitly noted that certain elements were missing: 'it does not include the large fan-shaped plume of macaw feathers at the top, nor the hanging macaw feathers with beetle shields'. The inventory card also mentioned that de Goeje likewise remarked in his encyclopaedia that 'the different components are stored in a *pagaal* (basket); the apparatus [*olok*] is only assembled for use'.

However, the inventory cards for the missing elements reveal considerable uncertainty. For example, TM-402-458 (Fig. 5d) is described as 'possibly part of an "olok", or ornament, which [...] is held in the hand during dances', while TM-403-170 (Fig. 5e) is noted as 'this "dance feather" may likewise be merely an ornament, intended to be hung on such an "olok"'. The repeated use of tentative language ('possibly' and 'may') suggests that the precise knowledge of how the *olok* was assembled had already become obscured following its arrival in the Netherlands.

It remains unclear when or why the *olok* was taken apart. It is plausible that the large and fragile headdress was disassembled during transport from Suriname to the Netherlands and either never reassembled, or reassembled incorrectly. Another possibility is that it was intentionally left disassembled because de Goeje had noted that the headdress was assembled only when in use; however, this seems less likely given that it entered a museum collection, where functional use was neither intended

nor expected. What is clear, however, is that the items now listed as individual 'dance ornaments' closely match the missing elements of the *olok*, including the use of specific materials such as the beetle *Euchroma giganteum* (Kaki 2023) seen in Fig. 5e. The misclassification of these components illustrates how the many events that can occur throughout the history of a museum object, from its original context to the multiple curatorial practices to which it has been subjected for over a century, can lead to the loss of its original meaning and integrity. The absence of descriptions of the object's components in the museum's online database and the superficial and tentative descriptions seen in the inventory cards further suggests a degree of institutional uncertainty regarding their provenance and function. In this sense, provenance research can contribute to recontextualising the object and its parts and to refining museum classifications, many of which stem from colonial-era systems of categorisation.

Each item carries embedded histories of appropriation, negotiation, power and resistance that cannot be fully understood without considering diverse worldviews and strategies. Failure to appreciate this complexity risks reproducing monolithic colonial narratives that erase Indigenous and other local agents.

Collecting the natural world

Although the ethnographic collections acquired during these expeditions have received considerable attention in this paper, the natural specimen collections assembled during the same journeys also possess a provenance worth examining. In both the Gonini (1903) and Tapanahoni (1904) expeditions, the Dutch enlisted the help of Indigenous individuals: Albert and Adolphe (Kalina and Arawak, respectively) during the Gonini, and William and Johannes (both Kalina) during the Tapanahoni. These men were recruited specifically for their deep knowledge of the local environment and their ability to guide Dutch scientists in locating and identifying plants and animals (de Ruiter *et al.* 2025). Since natural specimens were not collected during the Toemoekhoemak expedition (1907), this collaboration applied only to the earlier two.

The posthumous publication of Versteeg's diaries in 2019 has offered a portrayal of people who were previously erased from the narrative. Its pages frequently recount excursions alongside these Indigenous labourers, particularly Albert and William, highlighting their expertise in hunting, fishing and botany. Yet, their vital contributions were marginalised, or entirely omitted, in the official expedition reports published by the *New West Indian Guide* (de Ruiter *et al.* 2025). The collections now housed at the Naturalis Biodiversity Center stand as a material testament to the environmental epistemologies held and shared by Indigenous and Maroon Surinamese communities.

Object 9: *Maranta arundinacea*

Along the Marowijne river, Versteeg collected this *Maranta arundinacea* specimen (U.1391982, Fig. 6a) in 1904, adding to its description one local name (*prinhjaepite*) and its medicinal use for treatment of bruises. Now housed in the Naturalis Herbarium, this plant voucher retains multiple historical labels that trace its scientific trajectory: from its original collection in Suriname to its time at the Utrecht Herbarium, and finally its current preservation in Leiden. These labels not only indicate the institutions that have cared for the specimen, but also mark moments of direct scientific analysis, adding layers to the object's archival biography.

Despite its brief description by Versteeg, *Maranta arundinacea* is a significant domesticated species used widely among Indigenous and Maroon communities in Suriname. Its starchy roots are a food source, processed into flour and used to prepare porridges. Van Andel and Ruysschaert (2011) report its medicinal use among Carib-speaking communities to treat rheumatism and arthritis, while van Andel *et al.* (2015) further document its role in magical practices. Among Carib and Arawak groups, it serves as a charm for good fortune, and among Creole and Maroon populations, it is incorporated into ritual baths and ointments for diverse purposes, including incantations.

Versteeg's omission of these broader uses for the plant may reflect a deliberate withholding of knowledge by Indigenous and Maroon informants, an act of epistemic resistance towards the colonial gaze. His diaries do not mention the collection of this specific specimen, and the official reports offer minimal context. Botanical collecting is typically discussed in vague terms, such as de Goeje's remark: 'Versteeg found many plants there; a total of 18 today!' (de Goeje 1904b, p. 31). Versteeg himself writes: 'After breakfast I started botanising and collected 99 plants so that I could solder my first plant tin shut in the evening' (Versteeg 2019, p. 13). These accounts underscore how much contextual Indigenous knowledge remains absent from the archival record. Although we can now attribute the specimen's collection to the guidance of William and Johannes, the circumstances that prompted Versteeg to select this particular plant – its precise location, cultural significance and the expertise they shared – remain undocumented. This silence reveals both the limitations of colonial fieldnotes and the pressing need for provenance research that centres Indigenous perspectives.

Object 10: *Chelonoidis denticulatus*

This yellow-footed tortoise specimen (RMNH.RENA.38960, Fig. 6b), which Naturalis attributed to Versteeg as its sole collector during the 1904 Tapanahoni expedition, remains remarkably well preserved. Despite being over 120 years old, the specimen has retained its features thanks to its storage in a glass container filled with alcohol. Along with the animal, the jar also contains a field

note: on a paper label, the word *koo* is handwritten in pencil.

Consulting both specialists and published literature (e.g. Goury and Migge 2003, p. 250), it was identified that *koo* means 'tortoise' in the Ndyuka language. This seemingly simple note offers insight into the roles played by Maroon collaborators during the expedition, not only in assisting with the capture of animals but also in sharing local taxonomic knowledge with the Dutch researchers.

A passage from de Goeje's diary, dated 31 July 1904, may refer to this very specimen: 'While we are writing in our diaries at night, I hear something scurrying around, and grab a small turtle. The beast is secured in the usual way, to be put in methyated spirits tomorrow. On the head and on the back are three large *koeparis* [American ticks (*Amblyomma* species)]' (de Goeje 1904a, p. 29). As this is the only tortoise specimen from the Tapanahoni expedition held at Naturalis and no other tortoises are listed in the expedition report, it is plausible that it is the same animal mentioned in de Goeje's account.

On that same day, the expedition camped near the Ndyuka village of Akoeloe-Kondré. De Goeje noted the presence of 'Sindélé, the captain of the Ndyukas', who had joined the expedition's bivouac, located just outside the village, while the rest of the labourers remained within. It is therefore reasonable to speculate that the term *koo* may have been provided directly by Sindélé during this interaction.

Further examination of other alcohol-preserved specimens from the same expedition revealed additional handwritten field notes inside the jars. It is noteworthy, however, that while some of these include local names, such details are absent from the official collection database. This omission highlights how the contributions of local collaborators, though literally preserved within the jars, have been excluded from the institutional record.



Fig. 5. Wayana olok. a) 'Pontoetoe, hoofdman der Ojana's [Pontoetoe, chief of the Ojanas [Wayana]], 3 Nov. 1907'. © C. H. de Goeje (1908); b) Depiction of olok. © C. H. de Goeje (1906); c) Olok, object number TM-402-40; d) TM-402-458; e) TM-403-170. © Wereldmuseum

Discussion: Collecting practices

When discussing colonial-era museum collections, the dominant narrative often centres on violence, coercion and looting. While these practices undoubtedly shaped many European collections, they do not represent the full spectrum of collecting activities. This distinction is essential, not to absolve colonial structures of their exploitative nature, but to more accurately understand European collectors' dependence on local people and their knowledge, as well as the local dynamics, intentions and relationships that underpinned collecting practices in specific contexts.

Examining the provenance of the ten objects addressed in this paper, it becomes evident that they serve as a vivid testament to the intricate power

dynamics at play in Suriname and the wider Guianas at the dawn of the twentieth century (Gallois 1986; Barbosa 2007). The majority of objects from the Gonini (1903), Tapanahoni (1904) and Toemoekhoemak (1907) expeditions were acquired through direct trade, often mediated by key Indigenous *tamouchi* such as Toewoli, Majoli and Pontoetoe. These were not passive participants, but active agents who mediated access, navigated intercultural tensions and made decisions about whether and how to engage in trade. Their involvement was crucial to the success of the expeditions, particularly in deeper inland territories where initial suspicion or resistance to Dutch presence was common (de Ruiter *et al.* 2025, p. 28; Thoden van Velzen 2022, p. 240).

Over the course of the three expeditions, ethnographic material collecting grew in both scale and significance. During the Gonini expedition, the acquisition of material culture appears to have been secondary to the primary aims of mapping the territory and collecting natural specimens. Nevertheless, around 200 Wayana objects were gathered. Six months later, however, the Tapanahoni expedition marked a shift. Having learned from previous experiences, the team arrived with a clearer intention to engage in ethnographic collecting, particularly among the Trio, whom they had not encountered before. Their preparedness is evident in the large quantity of bartering goods brought along, carefully chosen to appeal to Indigenous needs, as recorded by Franssen Herderschee:

For bartering with Indians, (approximately): 60 kg of beads, 700 mirrors, 200 carving knives, 200 pocket knives, 100 scissors, 500 copper rings, 200 gold-plated rings and rings with glass stones, 12 old felt hats, 70 kamisas, 1,000 fishhooks, 36 tins of salt, some combs, harmonicas, needles, pins, thread, buttons, nails and cheap clothing, bells, iron arrowheads and 100 cards of porcelain shirt buttons for necklaces, further 40 axes and over 100 machetes. (1905, p. 6)

These items enabled the team to collect roughly 457 objects, more than double the number gathered on the previous expedition.

The final Toemoekhoemak expedition marked a further deepening of this collecting approach. Having built rapport with communities during earlier visits, de Goeje was able to focus more intentionally on ethnographic work. Logistical limitations prevented the collection of natural specimens, allowing the expedition to concentrate almost exclusively on gathering cultural materials (de Goeje 1908, p. 7). Around 260 objects were collected.

Despite the scale of this collecting, the official expedition reports, published under the auspices of KNAG, largely emphasised scientific objectives related to geographical and natural resources data. As a result, they provide only a few details on how material culture was acquired. Nevertheless, the Tapanahoni report contains a subsection authored by de Goeje where he provides a more detailed account of how he approached his anthropological work. Still more intimate accounts are found in the personal diaries of de Goeje and Versteeg, which illuminate the everyday collecting practices and the interpersonal relationships that enabled them. In these sources, de Goeje describes bartering scenes orchestrated by *tamouchi* such as Toewoli (Wayana) and Majoli (Trio). These leaders directed the flow of goods, clarified the preferences of the Dutch collectors and helped coordinate exchanges that benefited both sides. De Goeje noted with some astonishment how little it cost him to acquire the objects, given the value they held for the Dutch collectors:

First it is Majoli's turn, and when he has exchanged a number of things, the others can offer their goods for sale. Toewoli controls the trade. If for a moment one does not know what I want, he asks my wishes and then shouts, 'Bring hammocks, bring arrows' etc. and when a hammock comes, he gives the seller a knife, or whatever else he may desire. It is easy for me to watch, for although it is clear from the beaming faces all around that good business is being made, it costs me relatively little in exchange, due to the exorbitantly low prices that apply here. (Franssen Herderschee 1905, p. 95)

This quote is telling. On the one hand, it illustrates how Toewoli and Majoli exercised control over the flow of goods and decided who could trade and when. On the other, it shows how de Goeje was aware of the asymmetry in value, benefiting from what he saw as 'exorbitantly low prices.' Yet this asymmetry does not nullify the active role of the Indigenous traders, who were strategic in their exchanges and chose what to offer based on an understanding of Dutch interests and their own. In the same account, de Goeje explained:

My impresario Toewoli tells me that Majoli longs for the trading box to be opened; a drink should not be missed today and so we go back to the village. On the way, Toewoli instructs me how much I have to pay for various things; he certainly fears that through ignorance I should spoil the market forever. In Majoli's hut they put the chest; I have a mat brought and start displaying my beauty on it. A circle is formed and then the trading begins. (Franssen Herderschee 1905, p. 95)

Toewoli, a Wayana *tamouchi*, had previously established relations with the Dutch and, upon encountering their trade goods, wished to extend these benefits to allied communities. He helped lead the expedition to Majoli, a Trio *tamouchi*, thereby opening a door to a community initially hesitant to engage. Such diplomacy was vital because the Trio had been warned by Ndyuka Maroons to distrust the Dutch (de Ruiter *et al.* 2025, p. 28). The Maroons, concerned about their intermediary role being undercut, tried to maintain control over trade networks. As Thoden van Velzen (2022, p. 240) notes, the Ndyuka viewed the Dutch presence as an encroachment on their autonomy. De Goeje writes:

The inland Indians get what they need in terms of products from European industry, largely through the intervention of the Bush Negroes. Since they prosper greatly in that trade, they have a great interest in ensuring that the Indians never come into direct contact with whites. To begin with, the Yukas told them that they have a village somewhere near the sea, where they manufacture axes, beads, cotton etc. themselves. They also sometimes took Indians with them to Poelogoedoe and then told them that it is still an immensely long journey from that place to the sea. (Franssen Herderschee 1905, p. 98)

The management of information helped the Maroons maintain a monopoly on trade, but it also reinforces the importance of direct trust-building between the Dutch and Indigenous leaders. Without Toewoli's mediation, many of the exchanges with the Trio would not have occurred. These bartering scenes, though shaped by colonial hierarchies and Dutch scientific and economic ambitions, also reflect Indigenous agency, negotiation and local politics. Rather than imagining the collected objects as static remnants of a distant past, they must be seen as material traces of relational processes: of cross-cultural encounters, relational networks, diplomatic strategies and the everyday balancing of power and value.

The involvement of Maroon labourers was also critical, with individuals like Awensai recognised by the Dutch expedition members as invaluable collaborators and guides (de Ruiter *et al.* 2025). Occupying a unique and pivotal position as intermediaries in the relational network that extended throughout the Guianas (Barbosa 2007; Thoden van Velzen 2022), the Maroons' strategic location, social networks and knowledge of the terrain allowed them to significantly influence the circulation of materials, effectively shaping the access points for Dutch expeditions to Indigenous material culture. By controlling the pathways of exchange and interaction, Maroons acted as gatekeepers, filtering not only the physical flow of objects but also the knowledge and meanings ascribed to them. This mediated access highlights the complex social geography of colonial Suriname, where, despite the colonial authority, power and agency were also exercised by local groups through complex relational networks.

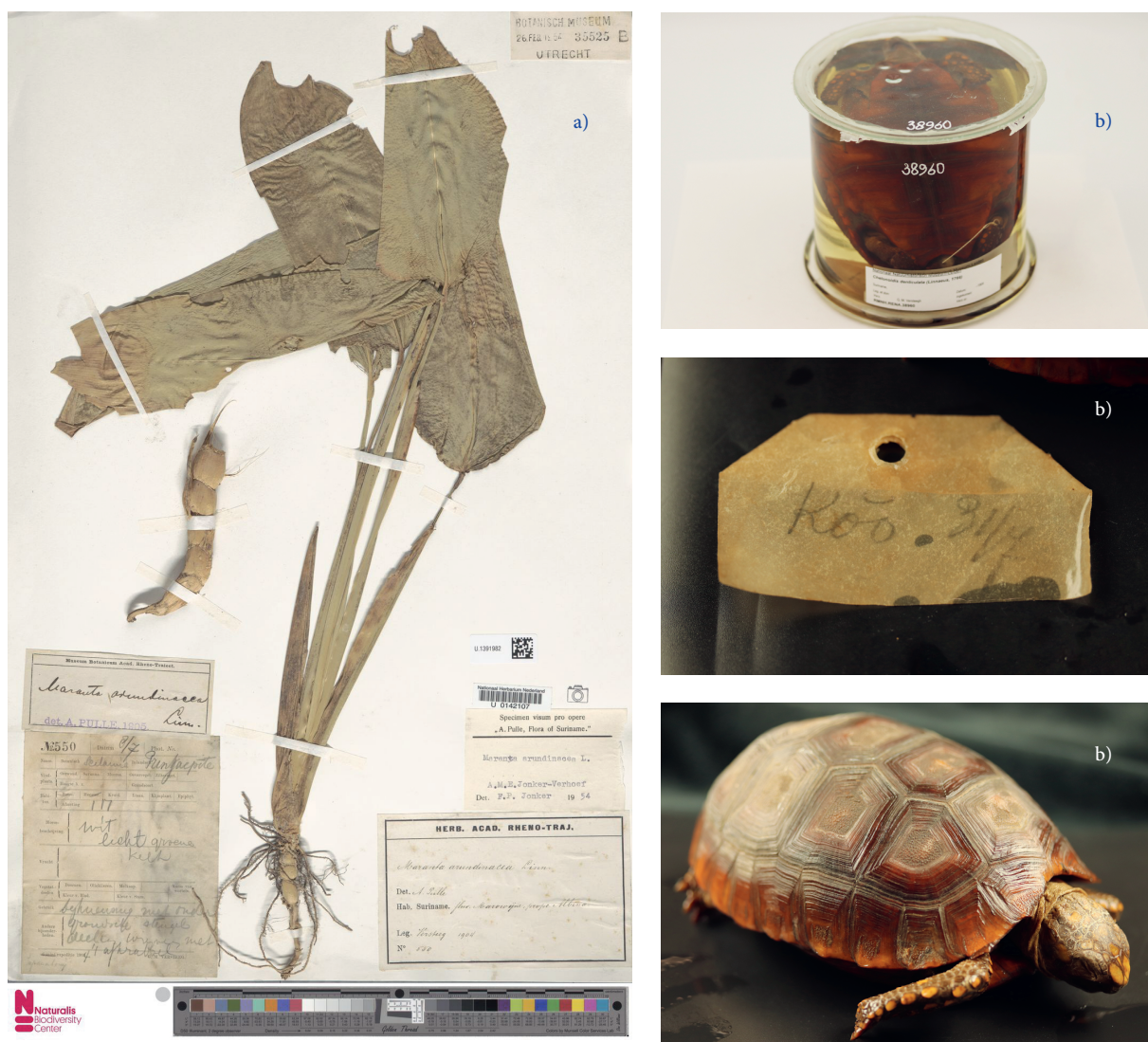


Fig. 6. Plant and animal specimens collected during the Tapanahoni expedition (1904), housed at the Naturalis Biodiversity Center; a) *Maranta arundinacea* (U.1391982). © Naturalis Biodiversity Center; b) *Chelonoidis denticulatus* (RMNH.RENA.38960) specimen preserved with original field note. © C. Fernandes Caromano

This dynamic challenges conventional understandings of colonial collecting as a straightforward extraction of Indigenous culture by European powers. Instead, it reveals a landscape of negotiation and influence, in which Maroons and Indigenous leaders exercised agency in determining what was shared and how. The Dutch reliance on Maroon guides and labourers for navigating the rainforest and procuring objects underscores the embeddedness of these collections in local socio-political realities, rather than in isolated European ambitions.

The collection strategies observed during these expeditions were neither rigid nor uniform; rather, they were fluid and shaped by context, as well as by the behaviours and attitudes of the Dutch collectors in their interactions with local peoples. Collection methods ranged from exchanges and commissions of made-to-order

objects to instances of coercion and unequal trade. Exchange, often assumed to be a fair transaction, requires more in-depth analysis. De Goeje recognised at times that such transactions were far from equitable. The offering of a complex and highly symbolic object, such as an *olok*, in return for seemingly simple European tools or even as an outright gift, may result from the power imbalance between the colonial representatives and Indigenous Peoples. In certain situations, however, it could reflect political strategies by Indigenous *tamouchi*. Such offerings might serve to consolidate alliances, assert leadership or reinforce social obligations with the Dutch colonisers. Still, it is important to acknowledge that Dutch barter goods were highly sought after in hinterland communities for their usefulness; tools such as fishhooks and machetes, though perhaps of little worth to the Dutch, held considerable significance

for Indigenous peoples. Hence, these exchanges functioned simultaneously as economic transactions, social negotiations and political gestures.

This fluidity means provenance research must be conducted with caution and an awareness of the broader cultural and political contexts. The seemingly straightforward categories of ‘exchange’, ‘gift’ or ‘coercion’ can obscure the layered realities in which these objects were collected. Each item carries embedded histories of appropriation, negotiation, power and resistance that cannot be fully understood without considering diverse worldviews and strategies. Failure to appreciate this complexity risks reproducing monolithic colonial narratives that erase Indigenous and other local agents.

Another significant insight emerging from this study concerns the underappreciated role of natural history collections within colonial provenance research. Traditionally, such studies have focused heavily on ethnographic objects (often made of natural materials), while neglecting the wealth of natural specimens gathered alongside them. Yet, as this paper demonstrates, in line with recent works that have shown the impact of Indigenous knowledge on the development of science (McCormack 2017; Das and Lowe 2018; Kuster 2021; Alcantara-Rodriguez *et al.* 2024), botanical, zoological and other natural history collections are a rich, albeit underutilised archive of local knowledge and colonial encounters.

Analysing these specimens beyond their associated documentation or the survey of collected species reveals new dimensions of provenance. For example, field notes preserved on alcohol collections or accompanying documentation often capture Indigenous and Maroon taxonomies, ecological knowledge and cultural significance related to plants and animals. Such data, encoded within the collection, serve as testimonies to local epistemologies that survived colonial disruption. Furthermore,

the scientific impact of certain vouchers and specimens as new species to Western science, for example, highlights the continuing influence of these colonial collections on modern science.

This duality underscores the need to move beyond a reductive view of natural history collections as neutral objects or simple species records. Instead, they should be approached as dynamic sites of cross-cultural knowledge exchange – in this case, where Indigenous and Maroon epistemologies and European scientific-economic ambitions intersected. This approach not only enriches provenance research but also contributes to decolonial scholarship by restoring Indigenous and Maroon voices and contextualising scientific knowledge within colonial histories.

Overall, the provenance of the ten objects presented here illustrates the entangled relations of power, knowledge and material culture that characterised early-twentieth-century colonial expeditions in Suriname. The Maroons and Indigenous leaders were not mere sources of desired goods but active participants in shaping how their cultures were appropriated. The fluidity of collection strategies reveals ongoing negotiation

and tensions rather than static colonial impositions, and the inclusion of natural history specimens calls for an expanded framework of provenance research that integrates approaches from natural and social sciences.

By controlling the pathways of exchange and interaction, Maroons acted as gatekeepers, filtering not only the physical flow of objects but also the knowledge and meanings ascribed to them. This mediated access highlights the complex social geography of colonial Suriname, where, despite the colonial authority, power and agency were also exercised by local groups through complex relational networks.

Conclusion

The provenance research undertaken on collections from the Gonini, Tapanahoni and Toemoekhoemak expeditions to Suriname in the early twentieth century demonstrates the critical value of integrating diverse sources of evidence (i.e. field notes, scientific and expedition reports, photographs, diaries and direct object analysis). Yet, the richness of this archival and material

evidence is also accompanied by challenges. These collections and their associated documents remain scattered across multiple institutions (sometimes even within a single institution), each shaped by different curatorial priorities and scientific frameworks. Consequently, provenance research requires a careful, interdisciplinary methodology that bridges critical archival research,

material culture studies and scientific examination to piece together fragmented histories. Such a comprehensive approach not only uncovers the layered stories embedded in these objects, but also deepens our understanding of the broader colonial dynamics and relational networks that shaped Suriname's material heritage.

Ultimately, this research underscores that museum collections are not neutral repositories; rather, they are entangled in histories of power, negotiation and exchange that reflect the colonial contexts of their formation. By critically engaging with provenance, scholars and curators can work towards more transparent, inclusive and contextually-rich narratives that acknowledge the roles of local actors – here, Indigenous and Maroon Surinamese – thereby contributing to ongoing efforts in decolonising museum practices and collections. Only by embracing this complexity can museums and researchers begin to untangle the colonial legacies embedded within collections, paving the way for more equitable, inclusive and informed understandings of Indigenous cultural heritage.

NOTE

1 Images of all the objects mentioned in this article are available through the online version of the article on the Taylor and Francis website, in the 'Additional materials' section.

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