

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A.PALULU

On the occasion of 'Expedition #2: The Life and Times of A. Palulu' taking place at the Artis Library in Amsterdam we asked Barbara Haenen to join us and share her reflections.

Plants have been telling stories for centuries. The collection of the Artis Library contains a book by Maria Sybilla Merian, published in 1719, called *Verandering der Surinaamsche Insecten (Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium)*. It contains plant stories, accompanied by scientific works of art. Maria Merian travelled to Suriname to study insects out of a personal fascination with small creatures. She created her detailed drawings two years after her return to Europe, on the basis of the descriptive notes she took in the jungle.

On the 29th of June, the second Glubbudubdrib expedition took place, and this time it revolved around Maria Merian's work. It began at five o'clock in the afternoon, just like the last time. Only this time the sun was still out, because the winter was over. At the beginning, when everybody entered the library, a film was shown on a big screen in the back of the room. This film had been

shot by Lotte Geeven in the jungle of Suriname. It depicted the jungle at six o'clock in the evening, gliding slowly past the plant forest. The air above the plants was black. Above us hung a balcony, holding more full bookcases. In the film, it had already become night, and from it invisible insects screeched into the library.

At the back of the library on the floor a carpet had been spread out. It was so big that several tables had to be moved to make room for it. It had been made out of countless small paint sample flyers from GAMMA's paint collection. They were the most commonly sold paint colours in the Netherlands. GAMMA had given each colour its own name. On top of the carpet stood a collection of tubes, each containing a pigment collected in the jungle. Each pigment was placed on the paint sample paper it resembled most closely. A dark green pigment stood on a dark green paper named *primeval forest*, next to a light green *past*. There was a dark yellow sample with the name *jungle*, a dark green *quest*, a dark pink *barbarian*, a light blue *chachacha* and a beige *saturday*.

The guest of honour of the evening was Maria Merian's insect book. She was the world's first

ecologist, because she painted the insects she had found on their corresponding plants. Ethnobotanist Tinde van Andel showed us Merian's drawings of plants, and allowed us to guess the plant. Or she let us read pieces of text, and asked us which plant we thought it described.

Every time someone in the room guessed correctly. For a second I secretly thought I recognized an unripe pineapple. It turned out to be a sour sop.

All the plants in Merian's 18th-century book still exist, and they never stopped being important. In the 21st century, Thiemo Heilbron went to Suriname to collect more plant stories. He did so for his Botanical Heritage Suriname- project.

Thiemo's research aimed to discover what plants can tell us about the history of plantations in Suriname. Merian's book did the same. Her book contains the story of a plant that was used by local women to end pregnancies, and avoid bringing children into a life of slavery. Thiemo's website contains the story of the *loweman bakba*, used by fleeing slaves as a primary source of food. The track which this banana left in the forest outlines the route along which slaves fled. These stories were gathered through personal testimonies.

In the East of Amsterdam there is a Suriname herb shop called Jursu Kultura. Jurman Blackson and Sabrina Lisse Venetiaan brought some of Suriname's plants with them from their shop to the library on the 29th of June. Such as the *Sibiwiri*, which can detoxify the blood, rid your kidneys of kidney stones, and your whole body of negative thoughts. And a dried sour sop, which we were all allowed to touch. We were told that it had calming properties. Someone from the audience noted that that had been scientifically proven. "Yes, it's true", said Sabrina.

Then somebody asked how knowledge of plants is transferred from person to person. Information used to be shared only in selective circles, answered Jurman – but can also be passed on through reincarnation. Some people are born with plant knowledge. There are children in the world who tell stories of events which occurred hundreds of years ago.

"How do you explain that?" he asked us.

In the end we discovered that a plant can also sometimes be a book. At the end of their presentation Jurman and Sabrina invited everyone

to stop by their shop sometime. They have even more plants there, as well as ‘an answer to your every question’.

Amsterdam, July, 2016

‘The Library a Jungle’ is part of the program ‘This Teeming World’ – initiated by Foundation Glubbubdrib. It presents seven library expeditions departing from the natural history collection of the Artis Bibliotheek of the University of Amsterdam.

Made possible by the loyal support of Special Collections of the University of Amsterdam, Artis Zoo, Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, Bankgiroloterijfonds, AFK and Akademie van Kunsten/KNAW.