Exploring the Cultural Richness of Southern India

PART I - A geographer never rests. It is engrained in us to examine the interactions of man and his environment, delving deep into our past, exploring the transformations (and challenges to transformation) of culture over time. What better way to explore all this than travelling yourself, allowing cultures to consume you while you simultaneously consume them, and allowing them to transform your thinking through your experiences.

India is without a doubt an undiscovered tourist destination. My mother is from the South-western state of Kerala, the destination of my journey. Kerala is known as the ‘land of coconuts,’ and for good reason. It is impossible to not be engaged in the production and consumption of coconuts, from the endless plantation scenery on every route, to the oil and milk by-products which give Kerala-style dishes its unique flavours.

For the first two weeks we shared in the traditions of Thrissur – my mother’s home district – visiting family members and shopping. The habits of Western culture, such as wearing three-quarter jeans and t-shirts, are met with piercing stares and laughter, and no matter how many times you wear such attire the response is still the same.

Our sightseeing began the second week in August. We journeyed from Thrissur on a 17-hour road trip to Chennai, in the state of Tamil Nadu. Quite contrary to the traditions of Kerala, Western culture had penetrated this landscape. We visited the multi-storey Spencer Mall, which contained British and American clothing stores, crowded with teens in the latest Western fashion. My sister was quite delighted to indulge for 2 days on Pizza Hut and Subway!

Staying within Tamil Nadu, the next day we travelled 60 km southwards visiting Mamallapuram, the site of the great Butterball (related to Lord Krishna’s love of butter), and the Varaha Cave, with its wall carvings depicting one of the ten reincarnations of Lord Vishnu dating back to the 7th century.

(Continued on page 4)
Focus: Jamaican Geographical Society (JGS)

Cockpit Country Hike. The long-awaited Cockpit Country weekend took place May 25-26, 2007, as a follow-up to our successful Cockpit Country panel discussion held in February. Our destination was aptly named the Last Resort, a remote place on the northern edge of Cockpit Country, near the Windsor Research Centre. JGS members and friends were joined by a small group from the Natural History Society and colleagues completing field research to delimit the boundaries of Cockpit Country; in all, 21 adventurous souls.

After an exciting night at the Last Resort, we had an early breakfast, after which we proceeded to make elaborate preparations which included fiddling with boots and applying copious amounts of insect repellent. We then marched off with our guides, Pem Pem and Ray, at a good pace. The trail took us through farm land before entering the first of three or four impressive cockpits, the largest of which is called Bamboo Bottom. Shafts of bright morning sunlight penetrated its huge stands of bamboo, creating a surreal, elfin forest landscape. Our path, hacked out in testing sunlight along the way in Bamboo Bottom with a high spirited friend of a farmer, but that story is for another issue. Halfway through Bamboo Bottom, the rain came pouring down, and didn’t stop until we were back on campus.

Tourism Mega-Structures. The latest Jamaican Geographical Society panel discussion took place at the University of the West Indies (UWI) Mona Campus in the Department of Geography and Geology on Thursday November 15, 2007. The discussion focused on the controversial issue of tourist mega-structures or “mega-hotels” in Jamaica. The event was well attended by a diverse audience, despite the noticeable absence of officials from the tourism sector.

The evening’s proceedings were chaired by Dr. David Dodman, Geography lecturer and JGS Council Member. The speakers for the evening were Ms. Jasmine Waite, a postgraduate student in the Department of Geography and Geology, Dr. Carolyn Hayle from the Tourism and Hospitality Institute, UWI Mona, and Ms. Wendy Lee from the Northern Jamaica Conservation Association.

Ms. Waite opened the discussion by presenting background information about the growth of tourism in Jamaica. She was followed by Dr. Hayle, who noted that in trying to find justifications for these tourism mega-structures, she ended up with more questions than answers. Ms. Lee then gave an insightful and well-illustrated presentation on the environmental and social impacts of these mega-structures.

When the presentations were complete there were several heated and controversial questions from various audience members.

Christmas Barbecue. Who knew throwing a barbecue could be so much work? Selling tickets, buying ingredients, finding tables, finding music, cutting chicken! It was a never ending list of tasks! Then came the hard part, setting up everything and coordinating the events of the day. But we pulled it off. Not without a few hiccups, of course, but mission complete!

(Continued on page 3)
Despite its small size, the Department of Geography & Geology (DoGG) continues to leave an indelible mark on the UWI Mona campus, being one of the most multilingual and multicultural departments at Mona. Each year the department has to reshape itself to suit changing times. This academic year has been no exception. In fact, the year started with a bang, or rather, a storm!!! Hurricane Dean passed south of the island battering southern sections of the island. Soon after we experienced the 2007 general elections which carried its own set of quirks. Nevertheless, both events passed and things more or less returned to normal.

Milestones. This year the department has lost two members of staff. Professor Wilma Bailey retired from the classroom after more than thirty years of service. Ian Brown, the department’s Museum Curator, migrated with his family to the United States. On a happier note, the department has got an extra boost through the injection of four new postgraduate students. Carlos Michelle, Joyelle Clarke, Jason Fisher and Stephanie Williams are the latest inclusions to the Geography-Geology family. This has brought the department’s postgraduate population to a record breaking twenty-two! Additionally, three members of the department successfully completed their PhD dissertations: Claudel Noel, Vivienne Vassel and Ashok Sookdeo. Congrats guys!!!

On December 2, Kevon Rhiney received the Prime Minister’s National Youth Award in the category. He is the second person from six who received the award in his sub-category. His achievement is one of the department to receive the award: Parris Lyew-Ayee did so in 2004.

Brown Bag seminars. The department has continued its “Brown Bag” seminar series. These seminars largely provide an avenue for the department’s postgraduates to present their work in an academic setting, as well as to be introduced to a variety of presentations from within and outside their disciplines. This semester’s series included several paper presentations, three of which were PhD upgrade seminars. Soyini Ashby, Robert Kinlocke and Chantelle Fingal are the department’s most recent set of PhD candidates. The other papers were presented by Dr. Balfour Spence and Kwame Emmanuel, both from the Department of Geography & Geology; Shakira Khan and Richard Coutou from the Marine Geology Unit; and Birte Timm from the University of Erfurt, Germany. As usual, the seminars were both insightful and interesting.

Conferences. Three members of the department participated in the 2007 meeting of the South-eastern Division of the Association of American Geographers (SEDAAG), held in Charleston South Carolina. Dr. David Dodman, Donovan Campbell and Shencika McFarlane gave paper presentations in a panel on “The Geography of the Caribbean and Latin America.” In addition, earlier this year the department along side the Department of Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology hosted a conference on Urban Cultures of the Caribbean. Several papers were presented from members of the department, including Dr. David Dodman, Dr. Susan Mains, and Kevon Rhiney.

Publications. The department has been able to contribute significantly to existing scholastic knowledge through a large number of papers featured in both peer-reviewed journals and books published in 2007 and coming in 2008. Some of the most recent contributions by the department include articles on agricultural geography co-authored by Professor David Barker in the Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography and Geographical Journal both in 2007; a chapter on food supply and authenticity in the Jamaican tourist industry written by Dr. David Dodman and Kevon Rhiney, published in New Perspectives in Caribbean Tourism (in press); a chapter on small-scale smelting written by Dr. David Dodman in The Caribbean City (in press); as well as an article in Focus on Geography (vol. 50, issue 1, 2008), and an entry in Oxford’s International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography (in press), both by Dr. Susan Mains. The geologists are not to be outdone, with work by Dr. Tom Stemman and Professor Simon Mitchell in the Proceedings of the 9th International Symposium on Fossil Cnidaria and Porifera; and a chapter by Professor Mitchell and Ryan Ramsook in the Society for Sedimentary Geology’s special publication entitled Cretaceous Rudists and Carbonate Platforms: Environmental Feedback.

For a detailed profile of the department please visit our website at http://www.mona.uwi.edu/geoggeo/.

Kevon Rhiney, Teaching Assistant, DoGG
**Zooming In: The Geography of Fear**

Everyone experiences fear at some point. We adapt in response to perceived threats so routinely that we are unaware of the extent to which fear has compromised civil liberties and affected daily life. The reaction to danger has such varied expression that it is impossible to produce a complete inventory. However, it is clear that responses to fear affect human life in tangible and intangible ways, particularly in relation to crime. Increased numbers of security guards at shopping centres, the exclusion of social groups perceived as threatening from public spaces, and the rise in the use of devices for personal defense constitute only a fraction of the ways in which the problem of crime has eroded the quality of life.

The relationship between geography and fear is most clearly expressed in two ways. Firstly, fear influences the organization of space through its role in residential segregation through the construction of both physical and symbolic boundaries, such as gates and other less obvious barriers to movement. Studies such as those by Colin Clarke and Ann Norton have linked segregation and retreat to a variety of processes including social and physical mobility, as well as political identity. The fear of crime features as part of this process as residents increasingly justify the need for division. Within the last three decades urban spatial structure has been redefined by the growth of gated communities which have been directly linked to increases in fear.

The cost of crime goes beyond the economic and physical losses imposed by criminal activity, and extends to the negative psychological impact of living in a state of constant anxiety. The second geographical dimension of fear relates to its production of place, as people mentally construct spaces as safe and dangerous based on the degree of fear evoked. Traditionally, urban cores have been tagged as feared spaces and suburban areas as retreats for the fearful. Of course, this is an oversimplified generalization; but it highlights the notion that the geography of fear is largely subjective and is grounded in the perception of place and evaluations of safety.

While crime as the object of fear is an important issue in both high and low crime societies, contemporary conceptualizations of fear include a dimension which is less frequently acknowledged. Recent literature has explored geopolitical fears emerging from threats to national security where issues of identity and territorialism surface as key features of an academic discussion in which fear is used as a political tool. This is contextualized by national and international struggles for security, democracy and development in a post 9/11 environment.

The geography of fear is fluid. Though it transcends the boundaries of many branches of human geography, it is more commonly positioned in urban social geography, cultural geography and behavioural geography. Being an inherently diverse discipline, geography has provided a spatial context for a concept that is traditionally located in other disciplines of the social sciences. **Robert Kinlocke, Graduate Student, DoGG**

---

**Exploring the Cultural Richness of Southern India (cont’d)**

*(Continued from page 1)*

After another five-minute drive, we arrived at Mahabalipuram — an important fort during the reign of the Pallavas of the Simha Vshu line. The carvings reflect typical South Indian style architecture with the earliest carving dating back to the reign of Narasimha Varman 1 of 630-688 AD. The monumets are carved from monolithic rocks, most still attached to the bedrock. These monolithic temples are known as the Panchapandaya Rathas. Each of the five (Pancha) temples are dedicated to a God, and facing each Temple God is a carving of his animal charriot. We also visited the Shore Temple, another 7th century monument in the same area.

One of the five Rathas, Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu (Photo: S. Kadir)

Another 7-hour drive later, we arrived in Bangalore in the state of Karnataka. I had always wanted to visit the main shopping area on Mahatma Gandhi Road (MG Road). If there were any one place on this Asian sub-continent that the West had conquered it would be here. Up to 11 p.m. the street is buzzing with activity, with persons from all nationalities, particularly from the Asian region, eager to consume the West. Within a week I moved throughout three states each with different languages, cultures, and even different climates. As a true geographer, I experienced firsthand ‘the local’ challenging ‘the global,’ as seen in Kerala; the homogenization of cultures in Chennai’s transformation; and the globalization of fashion and food experienced in Bangalore.

**Look out for Part 2 in our next issue!**

**Seema Kadir, Graduate Student, DoGG**
Switching Lenses: Space, time and the journey into professional geography

I was born in India, which is noted for excellence in science and technology. Most Indians opt for careers in medicine or engineering. I too had a strong fascination for pure sciences. As a child, I loved traveling, and enjoyed reading about natural and earth sciences. I was so determined to become an environmental scientist that I quit medical college to pursue ecology and environmental science. I wanted to be a field ecologist rather than a laboratory or mathematical ecologist. My idea of being a scientist was discovering or inventing something new, or proving or disproving an existing scientific theory.

Pursuing my passion was difficult, especially in Indian society, where although women excelled in the field of biology, they were not allowed or encouraged to become field ecologists. I first faced this issue when I was doing my Master’s in India. My research supervisor rejected my research proposal on fire ecology in the tropical forests of India because he felt that it was an inappropriate project for a woman to conduct. This, however, did not stop me from pursuing my passion as an ecologist. I joined the Indian Institute of Science, a premier science and technology Institute in Asia, which allowed me to carry out my research. After successfully completing my Master’s degree with distinction, I was recruited as a research assistant at the same institute, where I learnt what it truly meant to be an ecologist. My passion in field ecology kept growing, and I won a Ph.D. studentship at Royal Holloway, University of London.

In India, many believe science graduates are far superior to social science or arts graduates, and I shared that superiority complex. Hence, when I discovered that I would be joining the Department of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London, I was devastated, because I thought geography was not a science subject, and in India, people believe that geography is neither a pure science nor a social subject.

However, Royal Holloway completely altered my opinion of geography and social sciences, and this changed my career path forever. I realised how unique geography is. It is a science subject with a human touch, without focusing on human issues alone. I believe that other science subjects lack two things geography has. Firstly, human impacts are made an integral part of conservation and sustainable development. Secondly, female scientists are encouraged to play a vital role in the development of the subject. As a result, I am extremely proud to call myself a professional geographer, as it has enabled me to pursue my original dream while adding a new dimension to it. 

Savitha Ganapathy, Lecturer, DoGG.

Switching Lenses: Doing while learning geography

The Jamaican Geographical Society (JGS) and the Department of Geography and Geology (DoGG), UWI have been leaders in the creation of a holistic approach towards understanding geography as a discipline. I was first introduced to these institutions in 2000 as a student in college. Since then, their influence has been tremendous on my overall development, so much so that I became President of the UWI Geographical Society (UWIGS), and am now pursuing an undergraduate degree in the discipline.

As a second year student in the DoGG in the Humanities faculty, the knowledge and experiences that I have gained over the past year and a half have been most helpful in my present part-time job as meteorologist at CVM television, where I produce and present the weather report on a weekly basis. Had it not been for the experiences in Introduction to Physical Geography (GG10B), it would definitely have been difficult to understand the intricacies involved in weather phenomena. The climatology module gave me a solid foundation on which to build.

As a member of the UWIGS, and by extension the JGS, there were even more experiences from which to benefit. Several of their activities cater to the holistic development of students. The mini field trips put on by the UWIGS, and the resource persons that we have met from the different ministries and organizations testify to the plethora of opportunities that await us as geographers.

The field trips put on by the JGS have been important to me as they broaden the scope of the student who learns to appreciate geography through more than lectures. In addition, the students from neighbouring Caribbean territories get the exciting experience of exploring a Jamaica outside the confines of the UWI campus.

Working and Studying. This can be both difficult and rewarding. The major problem is time management. As one lecturer told us, school should be treated as a full-time job requiring a basic 40-hour week. However, earning a salary while studying can buy much needed materials, and in the end, the student is both educated and experienced.

Undergraduate students can make innovative efforts to build the department. We can reach out to the next generation of students, creating opportunities for them to better appreciate the discipline.

Marion Virtue, President, UWI Geographical Society.
It was odd to hear so many black people speaking something other than English. Yet I knew I was in the Caribbean when strange men called out to me on the street (the word of choice was chabinne, the Guadeloupean equivalent of “brownin”), because vagrants slept in the parks, and because I was followed a whole block by a beggar insistently asking me for 50 cents. I understood then why many of my interviewees thought that one thing that defined the Caribbean was common struggles. Many students also said that a typical Caribbean trait was “helpfulness.” I got an unexpected example of this at City Hall in Basseterre. French bureaucracy is legendary, and so, like Jamaican civil servants, no one I spoke to knew where I could get the information I needed. However, when one lady realized I would have to walk back to the library from which I had just come, she called a colleague and told him that her “niece” needed a ride. This colleague agreed without hesitation, though to my surprise he turned out to be from the Basque region of France. Is it that the Caribbean rubs off on anybody?

I heard so much Dancehall music blaring in the streets that I could have been in Jamaica, except that some was in French Creole. Also, unlike Jamaica, the “red light” street had Spanish-speaking prostitutes (apparently from the Dominican Republic) who solicited even in broad daylight. It was also more acceptable to speak Creole in formal settings. At a seminar I attended, one presenter – a university lecturer – delivered his entire presentation in Creole.

I realized this was the way fieldwork should be: so engaging you neither realize nor mind doing it all the time.

Soyini Ashby, Graduate Student, DoGG

Potholes and Paradise — A local girl’s fieldtrips

Portland is the parish of small tourist businesses seeking to maintain the beauty of nature while providing cozy abodes for their guests. My fieldwork in this area has led me to many discoveries, as several accommodation facilities are off the ‘beaten track.’ I discovered atypical accommodations such as Great Huts on the Edge in Boston Bay. These bamboo huts are on a cliff, below which there is a small but beautiful beach where several local boys go surfing. This made me aware of the potential for adventure tourism on the island. It was interesting to discover that several of the hoteliers interviewed were not Jamaican, but immigrants from Europe and as far as the Seychelles. Many of them knew more about Jamaican culture than I did, and were able to share many interesting facts.

The renowned friendliness of Jamaicans became quite apparent. I experienced my first flat tyre due to one of the countless potholes I inadvertently fell into during my trip. No worries though - men hanging out at one of the bars seen every half mile quickly came to my rescue, settling for a round of cold Heineken (the Red Stripes were hot) as a sign of my gratitude. Parts of the journey involved driving on marl, on the ‘wrong’ side of the road, taking detours on ‘donkey cart’ paths up hills where there was doubt as to whether two cars would be able to pass each other.

I then moved on to St. Mary and St. Ann. Between Portland and St. Ann, a gradual transition from small accommodations to mega-structures was noted. My stamina was tested at the larger facilities in St. Ann, as interviews ended with tours of the properties. Many interviewees were busy, so these tours were fast, and covered large areas, especially when they considered it essential for me to grasp the ‘entire picture’. My movements were often scrutinized, and I encountered general uncertainty and fear about what I would do with the information I gathered.

It has been quite interesting to discover that many of the owners and managers of the smaller properties had not put much thought into hazard or emergency management, and some were initially unable to see the significance of my study. Many later attributed this to a lack of financing, and little knowledge of the hazards not experienced yet, such as climate-induced sea-level rise. The larger hotels appeared better prepared for more frequent hazards such as hurricanes, but less so for hazards such as fires and sea-level rise.

In my travels, I have developed a new love of photography. On days when my appointments are postponed, I explore the area I am in, trying to find those places that are exciting but little known. Shopping in a resort town is a ‘no-no’ for a local girl; prices are exorbitant! The end of my fieldwork is nowhere in sight, but so far it has been an eye-opener, especially since I have to be constantly on the lookout for the next pothole.

Jasmine Walte, Graduate Student, DoGG

Snapshots: Views from the Field

A Jamaican Chabinne in Pointe-à-Pitre

Thanks to grants from the UWI and the Association of American Geographers (AAG), I spent a fascinating three weeks this summer investigating the manifestations of Caribbean identity among students at the Université des Antilles à la Fouillole in Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe. I soon realized that my fieldwork would entail more than interviewing students. In retrospect, how could I have thought otherwise? My research was the whole visit – every minute, every street, every conversation.

Pointe-à-Pitre was unceasingly interesting, so I constantly found myself doing that mysterious activity called “landscape interpretation.” I observed an astonishing amount of graffiti everywhere, and that the buildings were, as Jamaicans would say, “hitched up on each other.” So I was able to draw the very geographical conclusion that the use of space was very European, but the architecture still had the Caribbean beauty of nature while providing cozy servants, no one I spoke to knew where I – landscape interpretation. I observed every street, every conversation.

―landscape interpretation.‖ I observed an astonishing amount of graffiti everywhere, and that the buildings were, as Jamaicans would say, “hitched up on each other.” So I was able to draw the very geographical conclusion that the use of space was very European, but the architecture still had the Caribbean beauty of nature while providing cozy servants, no one I spoke to knew where I – landscape interpretation. I observed every street, every conversation.

Chabinne

A typical street in Pointe-à-Pitre. (Photo: S. Ashby)
Snapshots: Views from the Field
A Journey to the “Helen of the West”

Conducting fieldwork can sometimes prove to be a challenge, but doing it in St. Lucia - a country I had never visited - made the experience exciting and educational. The first thing I had to get accustomed to was the “French-sounding” St. Lucian accent. Additionally, I had to acclimatize myself to the “patois” that is spoken by a large proportion of the population. “Patois” is a mixture of French and English, and although I can speak both languages (a little bit of French), they are certainly very different from the way in which the St. Lucians blend them together. In spite of this, I am happy to report that I learnt that Fig fini san fairtrade means “No fair trade, no bananas,” and Bon jé translates to “Good God.”

St. Lucians are a warm people, and they welcomed me with open arms. The officials from the Banana Companies and the Windward Islands Banana Development and Exporting Company (WIBDECO) were very helpful, and provided me with valuable information for my thesis. The farmers were all eager to answer my questions and pose a few of their own. I even received a couple of marriage proposals.

The spirit of Fig fini san fairtrade in St. Lucia. (Photo: C. Fingal)

Going to St. Lucia was also a time of many firsts for me. It was the first time I walked through a banana field, where I discovered boundary plants (these separate farmers’ plots from each other). I also visited the Caribbean’s only Drive-In Volcano, the Sulphur Springs. Another first time experience was going to the Pitons, two majestic lava plugs that are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. While these were all enjoyable, my most memorable experience was Hurricane Dean.

Upon hearing that the then Tropical Storm Dean was heading for St. Lucia, I was initially unmoved. After all, God is a “trini,” and knowing that one of his trymen was in St. Lucia guaranteed that he would spare the country! Nevertheless, being a responsible geographer, I prepared for the storm. I purchased tin food and bottled water, while the place I was staying at provided a kerosene lamp, candles and matches. I must admit that during the storm I was scared yet fascinated at the same time. Being from the most southerly island in the Caribbean, I had never experienced anything like that in my life, especially after having fled Jamaica at the threat of Hurricane Ivan in 2004. My fascination with the storm led me to stand bravely (or stupidly) at my room window and videotape all that I saw outside. After Dean passed, I took pictures of the damage and waited for electricity and water to return.

As a result of the storm, I was unable to complete all of my fieldwork. However, my time in St. Lucia was still well spent. I experienced a plethora of physical and human geographical phenomena, which proved the point that geography is present in all aspects of life.

Chanelle Fingal, GraduateStudent, DoGG

Secrets to Doing an Undergraduate Thesis

My fieldwork over the summer break of 2007 consisted primarily of randomly distributing questionnaires relating to the topic of my thesis: “The Perception of Public Transportation in Barbados”. Apart from being mistaken for a Government official on a couple of occasions, most people with whom I came into contact were willing to participate. On the two occasions of mistaken identity, the persons were cynical, which I attributed to their previous encounters with Government representatives who never came through with their promises.

Undertaking any project, let alone the fieldwork for a thesis, requires considerable time management. It helps to get a good dose of reality, which I realized when I attempted to complete 60 questionnaires in less than a day. Having completed 9 questionnaires in just over 2 hours, I learned that randomly selecting people on the road to answer a questionnaire is no easy task.

The informal interviews I have done showed me how much the thesis has become a focal point in my everyday life. I arbitrarily encountered persons who had some knowledge in the areas of planning and government policy, and in order to interact with them, I had to readily recall the information I had gathered thus far on the topic. Ultimately, I gained a fresh perspective on the direction I should take with the thesis.

Some of the key points that I have learnt since beginning the fieldwork for my geography thesis are:

- It helps to start at home – the people around you do have something useful to add.
- Contacts are essential.
- Don’t travel without a pen, a notebook and a few extra questionnaires.
- Preparation pays off in the long run

Nya Greenidge, Undergraduate Student, DoGG
Join the Jamaican Geographical Society!

Call 927-2129 or 927-2728,
or e-mail seema.kadir@uwimona.edu.jm

Fees: Professionals—$800, Students—$200

Join now to be on our mailing list, and enjoy reduced fees for activities!

We cherish your opinion! Please send your suggestions and comments to soyini.ashby@uwimona.edu.jm