The compilation of historical black-and-white prints by botanist Ernst Ule (1854-1915) at the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (Ibero-American Institute, IAI) are as fascinating as they are diverse and have received relatively little attention from researchers to date. On the one hand, the collection features detailed studies of plants and landscapes scenes, including a few shots of cities and settlements in the eastern part of South America. On the other, it contains photographs of the indigenous population from the Brazilian-Venezuelan border area and images taken during Ule’s trip to the state of Acre, which had been transformed by the activities of rubber tappers and traders. The photo collection is therefore not only of interest to the field of botany, which was Ule’s actual area of research and work, but also provides an invaluable source of information on geographical, ethnographic, economic and socio-historical matters. The varied themes of the holdings reflect the adventurous life of a man with an interest in many different fields. He was not directly affiliated to any institution, which gave him the freedom to explore the area in and around Brazil more extensively than would otherwise have been possible.

Ernst Ule was born on 12 March 1854 in Halle an der Saale. After attending the horticultural school in Prószków from 1874 to 1876, he spent a brief period working at the Botanical Gardens in Halle. In 1877 he moved to Berlin, where he found employment in the city’s parks. As a young man, Ule suffered from a serious “mental illness” which is not explained in any greater detail in biographical literature (Harms 1915a: 151 ff.). As a result, he interrupted his schooling on several occasions and was forced to undergo in-patient treatment for two years. This caused a number of professional setbacks, which prompted him to migrate to Brazil in 1883 in the hope “of making a full recovery in a completely new environment” (Harms 1915b: 1).

After arriving in the New World, Ule initially worked as a private tutor in the state of Santa Catharina. In his leisure time, however, he continued to pursue his botanical passions, amassing collections of various items, such as moss and fungi. Ule worked for the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro from 1891 to 1900, but was ultimately removed from this position due to “political activities” (Harms 1915a: 153). In 1898/1899 Ule returned to Berlin and spent time at the Botanical Museum, studying and classifying the collections he had compiled in Brazil.

From 1900 onwards Ule worked as an independent explorer and subsequently embarked on three expeditions to South America, two of which lasted several years. In 1900 he crossed the Atlantic on behalf of the Botanical Museum Berlin and supported by funding from private companies who had an interest in the booming rubber production industry in South America. This trip involved extensive studies on “rubber tapping and rubber trading” (Ule 1905a) and saw Ule travel to the regions of the Rio Juruá, the Rio Madeira, the Rio Negro and finally the Rio Huallaga and the eastern slopes of the Andes in Peru. In 1903 Ule traveled back to Germany to study and classify the botanical collections he had compiled on his travels.

From 1906 to 1907, Ule was commissioned by a Leipzig-based “Bahia rubber syndicate” to embark on another journey, this time aimed at researching the rubber stocks.
Flower garden of the ants. Manaus (6 January 1902)
in Bahia. However, the information provided by the syndicate indicating rich deposits in this region proved to be just as unreliable as the promises of payment made to Ule. As a result, he was forced to go through the painstaking process of suing his client in court after arriving back in Germany.

Between 1908 and 1912, Ule set off on a final journey to South America that would last more than three and a half years, supported by funding from various institutions, including Berlin Royal Academy of Sciences. It took him to the border region between Brazil, Venezuela and Guyana, the Brazilian state of Ceará and the rubber forests in the border area between Bolivia and Brazil on the Rio Acre. Ule was in the middle of analyzing and classifying the findings from this trip when he fell seriously ill and died on 15 July 1915 in Berlin.

In his obituary to Ule, Harms describes the botanist as a quiet and reclusive man who at first glance hardly seemed the type to embark on such extensive trips through regions that were often difficult to access. Nevertheless, there were few researchers in his day who had such comprehensive knowledge of vast areas of Brazil and its neighboring regions. In addition to the well-documented collections, Harms also emphasizes the outstanding quality of Ule’s photographs.

The images stored at the IAI all date from the period after 1900, i.e. the third major phase of Ule’s life in which he undertook the three expeditions. The first trip resulted in some 180 photographs, which mainly documented the local flora. Ule’s work on this expedition also often focused on connections within the natural world, such as the relationship between particular plants and ants. In addition to including these pictures in his own publications, in 1904 Ule produced 150 botanical “catalogue shots” for commercial sale. In June 1905 he also showcased a selection of his photographs in an exhibition at the International Botanical Congress in Vienna, where he was awarded second prize (Harms 1915a: 162; Ule 1904a: 122; 1904b; 1905b).

Most of the photographs taken by Ule himself date from the second half of the trip. As a result, the majority of the images depict the Rio Negro in the vicinity of Manaus, as well as São Joaquim and the final leg of the trip to Peru. During the earlier stages of his travels on the Juruá and Madeira rivers, Ule did not feel that “he had sufficient practice” as a photographer (Ule 1904a: 122). This explains why Ules’s first detailed publications on rubber tapping – aside from one exception – featured pictures by Brazil-based photographer Georg Huebner.

Ule’s last trip to South America resulted in some 400 photographs (Ule 1914: 106). The IAI’s partial inventory of images from this trip not only includes botanical themes, but also images related to ethnography and social and economic history. What is striking about these pictures is that at least some of the portrait shots of the indigenous population in the northern Brazilian border area seem to have been taken at the request of the subjects themselves. Ule travelled around the area of the Rio Branco twice between September 1908 and March 1910, each time spending several months in the mountainous regions between São Marcos and the northerly, flat-topped mountain, Roraima. Ule made the following remarks on his relations with the indigenous population, several of whom he employed as porters, rowers and assistants during his travels:

The Indians assisted me in my work in many different ways; they flocked from all over to see me and I was in constant contact with them.

Initially, I was exasperated by the hordes of Indians who constantly besieged me. But they were so well behaved that I became accustomed to them in time. I used the opportunity to compile a series of ethno-
Research station Foz de Copéa am Solimões (29 April 1903)
graphic collections. I picked out some of the items myself and other people collected all manner of things for me. (Ule 1914: 83)

Ule later sold these collections to Berlin Ethnological Museum and Saint Petersburg. He noted the following about the production of the images:

The Indians were fascinated by the process of photography. The chieftain Ildefonso once told me that the Arecuna were sad because I had stopped photographing them. So I promised to make up for this by taking a photograph the next day. As a result, they decided to postpone their departure and I took another shot of them. From then on, I took one or several pictures of all visiting groups. (Ule 1913: 284)

Almost without exception, Ule’s ethnographic photographs consist of group shots or views of villages. The group shots include both portraits and images of dance festivals. On his photos, Ule generally noted the name of the ethnic group portrayed, as well as the date and place it was taken. Two pictures feature Ildefonso, who organized the transportation of Ule’s luggage and acted as his contact person with various villages. Alongside his brother Emanuel, Ildefonso is the only Indian to be mentioned by name and described in detail in Ule’s manuscripts. Ule stresses Ildefonso’s intelligence, his ability to speak numerous languages and also the special status he enjoyed in the region. Georg Huebner had already taken an earlier photograph of Ildefonso, depicting him in a uniform standing next to seven Makuxis and Wapixanas who were seated (Ourique 1906, fig. 79). Several years later, the ethnologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg painted Ildefonso in a far more negative light, accusing him of procuring his own people for foreign rubber prospectors and using all means to do so, including threats of violence (Koch-Grünberg 1917: 29, 56-59, 343).

Another collection of photographs housed at the IAI were the fruit of an expedition Ule undertook in 1911 on behalf of the Associação Commercial do Amazonas to study the rubber territory on the Rio Acre. The photographs paint a vivid picture of how the rapid global increase in demand for rubber had shaped the economy, society and transportation infrastructure in the upper reaches of Rio Purus and the Acre. In addition to the local flora, the images document the entire process of rubber production, from felling the trees and smoking the latex, to transporting the rubber balls on the backs of donkeys from the forest to the river banks and then on to the storage facilities of the vast companies that dominated entire regions, such as Casa Suárez on the border with Bolivia. Ule also portrayed the growing settlements, the increase in maritime traffic, the stockyards for firewood and the difficulties involved in transporting materials, such as a steamboat running aground.

Ule published several long essays detailing his research into rubber tapping between 1901 and 1903 in the Amazon, yet he barely had any photographs documenting this period. In 1911, by contrast, he compiled a comprehensive photographic record. However, due to his death in 1915 he only managed to publish a few of these images with his own annotations. This is one of several reasons why these photographs have yet to be studied in greater depth.

The IAI does not have a compilation of papers and manuscripts specifically dedicated to Ule. His photographs are part of the papers of two other explorers and are accompanied by lists, providing useful additional information. Eduard Seler’s papers and manuscripts contain 84 prints of the 150 botanical shots that Ule produced for commercial sale between 1901 and 1903. Walter Lehmann’s papers comprise another 32 prints. Some of these are duplicates of images in Seler’s papers; others add to the
Arekuna from the Rio Caruai (11 October 1909)
collection. Seler’s papers also feature a typewritten list of 84 photographs which were taken in Bahia in 1906 and 1907. Eighteen of these pictures are available at the IAI. A handwritten list documents another 228 photographs taken during Ule’s last trip to South America (1908-1912). In addition to images of plants and landscapes, these also include the aforementioned shots of the indigenous population in the state of Roraima, as well as the photos of the Rio Acre. All of the photographs listed have been preserved. The number of pictures actually slightly exceeds the total on the list, as several images were allocated the same number. In addition to the collection at the IAI, prints of Ule’s ethnographic photographs can be found at Berlin Ethnological Museum and Museu Paranaense Emílio Goeldi in Belém.¹

¹ As well as housing these collections, the holdings of the BGBM (Botanical Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem) also comprise two of Ule’s portrait shots. Aside from this, the BGBM has neither correspondence nor any other photographs by Ule (information provided personally by Norbert Kilian).

² See the essay by Kohl in this volume for more details on Huebner. I would also like to thank Frank S. Kohl for drawing my attention to Ule’s photographs in Walter Lehmann’s papers at the IAI.

³ The images depict the Arekuna, Makuxí, Wapixana, Akawaio and Yekuana (Maiongong).

⁴ The photographs in Seler’s papers and manuscripts are stored in cases 213 and 214; the images in Lehmann’s papers and manuscripts are in case 141 (IAI). The photographs stored at Berlin Ethnological Museum can be accessed online via the internet portal of Berlin State Museums (<www.smb-digital.de>). I would like to thank Nelson Sanjad for drawing my attention to the album in Belém. The “Papers and Manuscripts of Theodor Koch-Grünberg”, which are part of Philipps-Universität Marburg’s ethnological collection, contain several letters from Ule to Koch-Grünberg.

⁵ Mature flower garden of the ants with Streptocalyx angustifolius and Codananta Uleana (Ule 1904b: 6; 1905b: plate 6).


⁷ According to the aforementioned handwritten list, the courtyard in the photograph belonged to the Bolivian company Casa Suárez.
Home of chieftain Ildefonso on the lower Cotingo River (26 January 1909)
Bibliography


— (1904b): Inventory of photographs (13/18) featuring botanical catalogue shots from the Amazon River. (offprint).


Rubber balls in a courtyard in Cobija, Alto Acre (11 January 1912)