Episode 2

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pate, swahili, chair, poem, objects, people, island, world, coast, east african, collections, travelled, woodwind instruments, trade, podcast, african, crafts, writing, power, designs

**SPEAKERS**

JC Niala, Tom Fearon

**JC Niala** 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the second episode of Afro Historyscapes Podcast, where we give you a different perspective on African history. We tell the story of African histories through objects at the Horniman Museum and Gardens in South London. These objects bring to life fascinating stories from the past. Together with the objects and histories, we open a different window into African worlds.

**Tom Fearon** 00:44

We will show how these objects continued to be used on the continent and in the diaspora in various ways. The narratives we share are based on research carried out by the Horniman’s curators, and community researchers. Each month, we focus on a different theme. But we think another way to explore the history of Africa is through the idiom of movement. Africa is a dynamic continent that has always been on the move. If you are interested in African history, material culture and museum collections, then this is the podcast for you.

**JC Niala** 01:21

We are your hosts, JC Niala

**Tom Fearon** 01:24

and Tom Fearon. In our first episode, we started with the theme of trade by exploring the trade routes on the Swahili East African coast.

**JC Niala** 01:34

We followed the trade winds taken by 14th century African travelers like Ibn Battuta wrote about the impressive mediaeval cosmopolitan cities, such as Kilwa Kisiwani that were the heart of the world's gold trade.

**Tom Fearon** 01:51

We looked at images on a collection of 1920’s cigarette cards that showed the diversity of people who visited lived and thrived on the Swahili coast over the centuries.

**JC Niala** 02:03

This is Afro Historyscapes. Always something new, Always has been, Always on the move.

**Tom Fearon** 02:17

In this episode, we have returned to the Swahili coast by looking at different objects in the collections. Object number 1971.32 is a high backed armchair with a foot rest. Its frame is made of seasoned ebony timber, inlaid with richly decorated Ivory designs it seats and back are made of densely woven, elaborately patterned string. You can see a picture of this chair on the Hornimans Collections Online.

**JC Niala** 02:47

And it's one of my favourite objects in the Horniman collection.

**Tom Fearon** 02:52

That's great. Why is that?

**JC Niala** 02:54

Well, apart from being incredibly beautiful, the story of its origins overlaps with a poet whose work I love. She's a woman called Mwana Kupona. And she's famous for writing her Utendi, or poem, around 1858 Mwana Kupona came from the island of Pate, which is the largest island in the Lamu archipelago, off the northern Kenyan coast in the Indian Ocean. I've been lucky enough to visit lamu, and it's enchanting. The Indian Ocean is like a warm bath, and the island is almost completely surrounded by mangrove trees. In the main town, Siyu, buildings of plaster and brown and orange coral line a maze of narrow streets. Back in 1858, around the time when Mwana Kupona was writing her poetry, there was a thriving creative life and Siyu was home to a broad range of master craftspeople, including goldsmitha weavers, cloth, and furniture makers.

**Tom Fearon** 03:57

So, thinking about what was happening elsewhere in the world. Emily Dickinson in the US was also writing poetry around that time.

**JC Niala** 04:05

That's right. But their working lives could not be more different. Emily Dickinson was a recluse and never married. While Mwana Kupona was a prominent woman in her society, and wrote her Utendi for her 14 year old daughter and in the book length poem. She gives her young daughter guidance on how to conduct herself as a woman and also describes wifely duties. But the poem is also said to be mystical in the way that it talks about love.

**Tom Fearon** 04:35

Yes, I think I might have seen it.

**JC Niala** 04:37

It's very likely. There's an extract from the poem entitled ‘Poem to Her daughter’ that featured on poems on the London Underground, and it travelled all around the city on tube trains. There's a link to the poem in the transcript that accompanies this podcast.

**Tom Fearon** 04:53

I knew I'd seen it somewhere. It's a lovely poem, but you've lost me. What does it have to do with the chair that we're discussing in today's episode?

**JC Niala** 05:01

That's a good question. Well, Mwana Kupona was married to Sheikh Muhammad Ishaq bin Barak bin Mohammed bin Omari is more commonly known as Bwana Mataka, they would have used a pair of chairs exactly like this one, because he was the ruler of Pate island on the Swahili coast. A chair like this one is called Kiti cha Enzi or chair of power. And they're held in collections in museums all over the world, because of their striking beauty.

**Tom Fearon** 05:31

But they're also very practical. They were also designed to be made easy to move weren’t they?

**JC Niala** 05:36

That's right. Despite the fact that they're impressively solid. Swahili woodworkers and craftsmen of the 18th and 19th century were highly skilled, and used an intricate system of interlocking pieces of wood to make the chair both sturdy, but also easy to take apart and move as required. Rulers on the Swahili coast were people on the move and even if they travelled up and down the coast, they took their seat of power with them.

**Tom Fearon**

So did these chairs travel anywhere else?

**JC Niala**

Well, there's a good argument that Mississippi riverboat chairs were made following inspiration from Swahili furniture. There were American travellers and the latter part of the 19th century, who took many of these types of chairs back to the US with them, where they likely triggered a whole new fashion in furniture, especially in New England.

**Tom Fearon** 06:29

And where do you think that the Swahili Craftsman got their inspiration from?

**JC Niala** 06:33

Well, that's a trickier question. As we talked about in the first episode of this podcast series, European scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries when a tutorial for not believing it was possible for African peoples to create objects that they would consider valuable. So there are many theories that claim it would have been impossible for the furniture makers of Pate, to have developed these chairs independently. Chairs do have designs that are similar to Egyptian chairs. And indeed, Swahili civilizations were trading with Egypt from at least the 10th century. As we know, Swahili peoples were also trading with people from Portugal, Oman, India, amongst other places. And when people trade, they exchange not just objects, but also ideas and influences.

**Tom Fearon** 07:24

So what do you think the answer is JC?

**JC Niala** 07:27

Well, I think that the story of the poet Mwana Kupona, and her husband Bwana Mataka can show that it's not simple to say one way or the other. Pate island was a flourishing place in the 19th century, and everyone agrees that they had incredible crafts people. But there was also a marked difference between Pate and other East African islands, like Zanzibar. Even though Mwana Kupona's family that ruleed the island may seem modern, because Mwana Kupona was a famous poet, if you read her work, it's clear that they also held some conservative views. Zanzibar was more cosmopolitan, and people there couldn't wait to take on the latest fashion from across the seas. Bwana Mataka and his family both resisted certain new ideas, and also colonial forces. Their son, Mohammed bin Mataka, for example, held a successful military campaign against the powerful Sultan of Oman.

**Tom Fearon**   
So what does all this mean for the chair?

**JC Niala**

Well, I think that it means that Pate was a place where traditional arts and crafts were valued. So a lot of the skills that have gone into making the chair of power were developed in Pate. However, we know that the ruling family also appreciated the finer things in life. So they wouldn't have rejected all external influences, but more likely incorporated what they thought was good into the designs.

**Tom Fearon** 08:57

What happened to the craftspeople and Pate in the late 19th century?

**JC Niala** 09:01

Well as you can imagine, a number of things. In 1885, the island's population was decimated by smallpox, as well as objects and ideas, trade can also bring disease and the people of Pate even though they were interconnected to the rest of the world through trade, had no natural immunity to it. They were no longer able to resist, first, Omani colonisers from the Middle East, and eventually, British colonial forces, who forced the Lamu archipelago, including Pate to be under their rule. And what was then called the East African Protectorate and is now the Republic of Kenya.

**Tom Fearon** 09:42

So does that mean that chairs like this are no longer made?

**JC Niala** 09:45

Well, despite the devastating disruption the colonial project brought to the East African coast, there's still many Swahili crafts people making furniture, distinctive Swahili boats called Dows and the word that they use called Mpingo is one of the materials that helped Mozart's music to travel all around the world.

**Tom Fearon** 10:06

Really, Mozart?!

**JC Niala** 10:08

Believe it or not Mpingo whose Latin name is Dalbergia Melanoxylon is an East African blackwood that is used to make, amongst other things, clarinet and other woodwind instruments that are key parts of orchestras around the world.

**Tom Fearon** 10:24

Wow. So how did you end up researching that?

**JC Niala** 10:27

When researching Kiti cha Enzi or the chair of power, I not only looked at the stories that were connected to it, I also researched the types of materials that Swahili craft people used.

**Tom Fearon** 10:40

That's one of the exciting things about working with collections, isn't it? You never know where the research will lead.

**JC Niala** 10:45

Exactly. I'd have never guessed that the noises that I produce from my clarinet would have the same source as the chair of power. We tend to think of classical music as European. But even though the composers may have come from Europe, the sounds the woodwind instruments make are from the African continent. Mpingo is an exceptionally durable word, and coupled with its fine texture, it makes the distinctive sound of Mozart's much played clarinet Concerto in A major.

**Tom Fearon** 11:17

So is that what we're going to talk about in the next episode of our podcast in this series on trade?

**JC Niala** 11:22

Exactly that, we're going to look at where the materials and goods that came out of the Swahili coast went, and the impact that they've had on the wider world.

**Tom Fearon** 11:36

We hope you enjoyed this episode about the chair of power and the poet Mwana Kupona. As JC shared, the island of Pate off the Northern Kenyan coast, has had a long history of crafts making that has travelled the world.

**JC Niala** 11:52

Thank you for listening to Afro Historyscapes podcast, with JC Niala.

**Tom Fearon** 11:57

And Tom Fearon

**JC Niala** 11:59

This is Afro history escapes. Always something new. Always has been always on the move.