**JC Niala**

Hello, and welcome to the third 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**

We will show how these objects continue 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**

We’re your hosts JC Niala

**Tom Fearon**

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**

In our second episode we looked at Kiti cha Enzi or the seat of power which is a stunning example of Swahili furniture that influenced makers as far away as the U.S.

**Tom Fearon**

We discussed the link between the chair and poetry on the London underground.

**JC Niala**

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

**Tom Fearon**

In this episode we have returned to the Swahili Coast by looking at an object that would not normally be thought of as African. The object with museum number 2004.1080.1 are clarinet blanks estimated to be from the 1950s. They are a good example of clarinet joints at different stages of the instrument being made. Combined with the notes from the archives – museum number - ARC/MCG/MS/1355-1371/1366 its possible to get a good sense about how clarinets are made – though it does tell the whole story does it?

**JC Niala**

No it doesn’t – the wood used to make the blanks, is Mpingo or use its Latin name Dalbergia Melanoxylon. It’s an East African Hardwood which is what gives the best clarinets their distinctive sound.

**Tom Fearon**

But it’s not the only instrument that is made from Mpingo – oboes, wooden flutes and bagpipes are as well.

**JC Niala**

You’re right – its versatile as well as distinct. It’s fine grained but at the same time it is resistant to cracking which is what makes it wonderful to work with. It is possible to drill in delicate finger holes and yet get a smooth and beautiful finish to the instrument.

**Tom Fearon**

Is the wood from Mpingo another one of the natural resources that became a commodity due to colonialism?

**JC Niala**

Yes – it is. I do like to think that Mpingo went on to touch the world in a special way despite colonialism. The Mpingo tree is really quite magical. It looks like a gnarly twisted heavy branched oatmeal coloured tree – not something that you would associate with beautiful sounds, but it is also perfectly adapted to its East African coastal environment. For one thing it grows very slowly –taking from 50 to 120 years to mature. In the first 8 or so years it puts down an extensive root system which allows it survive droughts but also enriches the soil that it is in.

**Tom Fearon**

Um but if it is so twisted – how is a straight clarinet made from it?

**JC Niala**

It’s made from the heart of the tree which is a dense ebony and before it was used for musical instruments it was used by Makonde peoples of the East African coast to make masks and carvings that have deep spiritual significance and meaning. Even today Makonde peoples use Mpingo made carvings to educate society about important issues such as how-to live-in harmony with our environment. Sometimes these carvings get called The Tree of Life and even though there is no conventional evidence for it, I believe that the Mpingo tree holds a wisdom that gets communicated through those who interact with it. It may sound strange, but I find it fascinating that the principle ways in which it has been used over centuries is to touch people whether through spiritual art or music.

**Tom Fearon**

Could you say a bit more about what you mean?

**JC Niala**

Whether in Europe or Africa, Mpingo’s primary use has deep spiritual roots. On the East Africa Coast, it was through the Makonde carvings that were also used to make masks for masquerade. Some of the spiritual rituals associated with masquerade have been either been watered down or lost over time but masquerade is still at the heart of Carnivals that happen all around the world from Cape Town to London to Port au Prince.

For Makonde peoples on the East African Coast, wearing a Mpingo mask allows the wearer to be someone else, or be inhabited by something else. There are the jovial fantastical elements to masquerade which can be a beautiful spectacle but there is also the powerful side.

Taking the view from the West African Coast, the Niegrian writer Chinua Achebe often quoted the Igbo proverb “The world is a dancing masquerade. If you want to understand it, you can’t remain standing in one place.”

**Tom Fearon**

What did he mean by that?

**JC Niala**

In interviews I read and listened to – he said that masquerade is motion – all kinds of motion. I understand it to mean that masks in masquerade carry that motion as a link between us and the ancestors, us and eternity or us and God.

**Tom Fearon**

I see what you mean – and Mpingo in Europe was used to make instruments for classical music which has strong religious – specifically Christian ancestry.

**JC Niala**

It may seem strange to say it now because there are many secular classical composers but composers like Mozart who wrote (amongst other things) music for the clarinet were Christian. They felt inspired by God and their music generated and still generates a feeling of awe.

**Tom Fearon**

Do you think this feeling of awe transcends religion?

**JC Niala**

I think that it does – you don’t have to be Christian to be moved by the music that comes from a Mpingo clarinet but equally religion or spiritual belief can use music as a vehicle to spread its message. An example I love is the one that you shared with me about Fanfare Kimbanguiste.

**Tom Fearon**

Ah yes – This is a short film that was filmed in London by Sociologist and Filmmakers David Garbin and Enrico Masi, with members of the Kimbanguist church. It shows different generations of the Congolese diaspora playing Fanfare music together in the church band. They play their music in parades and at public events and is something which demands representation and visibility. But most importantly for the Kimbanguist church, music is a medium to spread the message of God and Kimbangu teachings.

**JC Niala**

Thanks for the reminder – I think that it’s such an important story – what is more commonly discussed are the missionaries who left Europe to spread Christianity on the African continent but in the 20th and 21st Century we are seeing a real reversal of that movement, with African missionaries bringing their Christianity to Europe.

**Tom Fearon**

Yes! And this is a theme we will be returning to a few episodes time. But for now, there’s another connection with Fanfare Kimbanguiste isn’t there?

**JC Niala**

Yes – Armaud Diangienda the grandson of the religious leader Simon Kimbangu started what was then known as the world’s only all black African symphony Orchestra in Kinshasa in 1994. The orchestra’s roots stem from a church that espoused the philosophy that ‘to sing is to pray twice’ and had within it already numerous choirs, a brass band, flute orchestra and guitar ensemble.

When Armaud Diangienda started Orchestre Symphonique Kimbanguiste he had to learn how to read music. Many of the players were self-taught and helped to make their instruments from scratch. Being located in the Democratic Republic of Congo -despite all the conflicts and wars that the orchestra members had to endure – they grew from 12 to over 200 members - have since toured the world and Armaud Diangienda has been made an Honorary member of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra alongside great classical ancestors such as Mendelssohn, Brahms and Stravinsky.

**Tom Fearon**

That’s incredible.

**JC Niala**

Yes, it is. There are now increasing numbers of different types of orchestras across Central and East Africa. I love the way Mpingo wood with its spiritual roots left the East African coast to be fashioned into wood wind instruments in Europe. These same wood wind instruments then returned to Africa through music that was composed by Europeans who said they were inspired by God. Their journey did not however stop there. Mpingo wood wind instruments went on to be played by African people who call themselves soldiers of God and have brought their religion to Europe.

**Tom Fearon**

I can see why you get so much out of researching Mpingo.

**JC Niala**

Yes, there’s always another intriguing connection. But the wider theme that we have come to of religion and spirituality is where I am going to be handing over to you. For the first three episodes of this podcast, we looked at the theme of trade – taking our view from the Swahili East African Coast. I clearly remember the moment when you linked trade with spirituality, and I look forward to hearing more about those links.

**Tom Fearon**

For the next three podcast episodes we will be focusing on the topic of Religion- something which has fascinated me for a long time. We will see how objects in the Horniman collection can tell stories about the significance of religion in Africa, both historically and today. Religion is almost always implicated in the movements of people and objects and is often a motivation for trade, art, identity, and migration. We will look at the connection between Islam, trade and spirits known as Djnn, the importance of Christianity throughout Africa and in the dispaora, and finally we will explore the role of Yoruba traditional religions in west-Africa and across the Atlantic. I’m very excited about these episodes!

**JC Niala**

But before that, we have a treat in store. One of our community researchers Sherry Davis joined us to make a podcast where she interviews Jimbi Katana. He is a Kenyan heritage professional who has personally been involved in excavation along the Swahili Coast and was also involved in the repatriation of material cultural heritage to the Kenyan coast.

**Tom Fearon**

Because it is a podcast special – it will run longer than our usual 10 – 15 mins.

**JC Niala**

We look forward to you joining us next time for the special.

**Tom Fearon**

And following that the next three episodes that focus on African religious worlds and the movements that are entangled in these histories.

**JC Niala**

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

**Tom Fearon**

And Tom Fearon

**JC Niala**

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