# Episode 4

**SPEAKERS**

Sabrina Al-sayed, JC Niala, Tom Fearon

**Tom Fearon** 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the fourth 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.

**JC Niala** 00:40

We 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 Action 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, this is the podcast for you.

**Tom Fearon** 01:18

We are your hosts, Tom Fearon

**JC Niala** 01:21

and JC Niala. In our first three episodes, we focused on the East African Swahili coast, where we explored the people who lived, traded, ruled and crafted objects over the centuries. We looked at objects from the Horniman’s collections, ranging from cigarette cards, to furniture, to clarinet blanks, which can tell us stories about how literature, poetry and music, find their inspiration on the Swahili coast.

**Tom Fearon** 01:54

And these objects show us how the movement of people, objects, and ideas from the African continent has shaped its rich history, and has made an impact on the rest of the world.

**JC Niala** 02:06

And this week, and for the following two episodes, we're moving on to the theme of religion, where we look at the ways that religion and spirituality are dynamic forces that have shaped the histories, material culture, and cosmologies of peoples on the African continent.

**Tom Fearon** 02:26

And if that doesn't get you excited enough, we're pleased to be joined today by Sabrina Al Sayed, a community action researcher who is currently working with the Horniman to explore the black African contribution to Islamic art. We will be discussing some of these themes in this episode. Welcome, Sabrina.

**Sabrina Al-sayed**

Hello. It's great to be here.

**JC Niala** 02:46

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

**Tom Fearon** 03:00

In this episode, we focus our attention to two objects, which hail from the Sahara desert of Northern Africa, and the Sahel region to the south, belonging to the Kel Tameshek peoples. Kel Tameshek translates as ‘speakers of Tamashek’, who are more commonly known as the Tuareg. Object numbers 2007.214 and 2007.158 are pieces of silver jewellery worn by the Kel Tameshek peoples. The first is a beautifully crafted large decorative amulet made from silver with mesmerising geometric embossing on sweeping triangular pendants of different sizes, with a leather strap. And the second is a silver cylindrical container known as a Korkoro, decorated with geometric patterns using the repousse technique. I've been fascinated by these objects for a long time. Every time I visit the world gallery at the Horniman I head straight for these objects where they're on display. And pictures will also accompany this podcast.

**Sabrina Al-sayed** 04:10

These objects are examples of the deep connection between artistic and religious traditions of the Kel Temasek people,

**JC Niala** 04:20

Yes, I think I've seen these and I think they're beautiful. There's a display in the gallery about the lives and cultures of Kel Tameshek peoples. What have you learned about them, Tom?

**Tom Fearon** 04:32

Well, for centuries, as early as at least the 11th century, the Kel Tameshek peoples have been key actors in the trans-Saharan trade routes, particularly in the movement and trade of salt and gold, but also, sadly, people the now abandoned desert city of Asode and the modern city of Agadez in what is now known as Nigeria, as well as the famous city of Timbuktu in Mali, were established by Kel Tameshek traders. The location of these cities have been key throughout history in connecting the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and East Africa, with the kingdoms of West Africa. Kel Tameshek peoples are traditionally nomadic and pastoralist and have been trading in the Sahara since prehistoric times. Meaning that their knowledge of these trade routes, and the often-harsh conditions of the desert made them powerful and important actors along these trade routes. Today, despite the historical importance, and since the post colonial redrawing of nation states Kel Tameshek people often find themselves marginalised in the various countries in which they now live.

**JC Niala** 05:43

That's unfortunately true. But what of these objects got to do with religion?

**Tom Fearon** 05:49

Well, these objects, although relatively contemporary, tell us so much about Islam and trade across northern Africa. With these trade routes, and caravans of traders from the east came the influence of Islam. It's in the interactions through transactions of goods that Kel Tameshek peoples embraced Islam, although they incorporate aspects of traditional religion too. T heir influence across trade routes helped to establish Islam in western African empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai, which cover modern day Mali, Niger, Mauritania and Senegal, and many other parts of West Africa too. Much of this history is recorded by Islamic scholars, trav ellers and historians, including our friend from episode one. If Ibn Battuta tutor he certainly did get around.

**Sabrina Al-sayed** 06:44

Yes, and this Islamic influence long trade routes did not just move from east to west. The abundant trading gold made these West African kingdoms rich and powerful. And in the Horniman collection, there are examples of gold weights, which would have been used all across the trade route for transactions. They were often used to wear gold dust, which was in itself a currency at the time. Probably the most well known emperor of the Kingdom of Mali, Mansu Musa accumulated his wealth from gold. On his long pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. He had along with him a troop of 60,000 each reportedly carrying 1.8 kilogrammes of gold. On this route, his generosity calls and extended gold recession and Egypt and upon his return, Mansu Musa bought with him architects, who helped build the iconic and stunning Djinguereber Mosque, which still stands today.

**JC Niala** 07:42

So other than looking beautiful, why do Kel Tameshek peoples still make and use this jewellery?

**Tom Fearon** 07:50

Well, these pieces of jewellery despite being examples of exquisite pieces of art, holds an important spiritual significance. These pieces are worn as a form of protection from dangerous spirits known as Kel Asuf, or people of the void, who dwell in the desert, particularly on the outskirts of towns and can attack people by possessing them. Kel Asuf are thought to be pre Islamic spirits who refuse to be forgotten. But they're also incorporated into the framework of Islamic cosmology, where evil spirits are often known as a type of jinn, or Jinni, on journeys across the desert, including for trade. amulets, like these are worn as protection from Jinn.

**Sabrina Al-sayed** 08:33

That's true. The second item, the veil way that is known as Korkoro, which you described as cylindrical earlier is assumed to contain Quranic text. Because the two ends cannot be removed without damaging the object, we can't say what's inside for sure. Across the Islamic world, Amulets are used as a form of protection from evil. Many of these kinds of objects will bear Quranic inscriptions, prayers, hadiths, astrological signs or one or all the names of God. Many amulets protect the wearer from evil, the evil eye, which is thought to be a curse given by a malevolent glare, and jinn, because it's thought that a proportion of them may cause harm, just like the Kel Asuf people you just mentioned. I thought I'd also mentioned that in classic Islamic theology, the use of amulets is considered haram, which means forbidden. Scholars argue that only active recitation of the Quran and prays will protect you, and that inanimate objects do not hold God's power. It's a reminder that Islam is not necessarily a monolith. There are many interpretations and cross-cultural influences in Islamic practices across the world.

**JC Niala** 09:55

That's true. Another example of this difference is often azure veil which is significant in Kel Tameshek culture, and is worn only by men who should never remove them. The veil weight might have a practical use in keeping men's veils in place to protect them from the desert sand and the heat of the sun. But I'm also intrigued as to why these objects are often made of silver and not gold, considering Gold's abundance on these trade routes. Sabrina, I know you had some thoughts on this.

**Sabrina Al-sayed** 10:30

Well, there could be a wide variety of explanations. Silver has long been known and documented to be an effective anti microbial element. This means it works well against some bacteria, viruses, and fungi. Despite humans only beginning to recognise microbes in the last century, due to developments in the microscope. It's been used the world over as a preventative to infection. It seems logical then for some societies to assume silver has magical properties to protect one malevolent spirits too, in fact, in Tuareg cosmology, silver is considered the purest metal and gold less so. Other reasons are that gold is forbidden for men to wear in Islam so silver has a greater appeal, as can be worn by both men and women. Silver is also a cheaper metal. Finally, a point that links back to what we discussed earlier is trade. Gold has always played an important part in trade and transactions. And so its associations seem to be more worldly more of a protective metal of livelihood, rather than of spirit.

**Tom Fearon** 11:43

Sabrina, that's fascinating. But what really draws me to these objects is the way that they can tell us about the spirits they protect the wearer from. We've had some great conversations about Jinn when preparing for this podcast. But Sabrina, what exactly are Jinn?

**Sabrina Al-sayed** 11:59

Oh, Jinn are and mean many things to different cultures and even people within that. In the Quran, they are referred to as spiritual beings who are made of ‘smokeless fire’. They all have free will and are often put in the same category as humans in terms of the expectation to follow the teachings of God and the prophets- peace be upon them. Actually, many verses in the Quran are specifically directed to both humans and Jinn. Scholars believe that Iblis, known as Satan and Christian theology, was the first Jinn. For me, I'd always seen them as scary beings growing up, I was taught that they existed ,shared our world which included, and incredibly frightening for me as a child, shared our home! I was always assured though, that the mischievious ones could do no harm if you sought refuge from them to God. The ones I thought were most fascinating, however, with a Muslim ones, they will not harm you as long as you respected their space.

**JC Niala** 13:08

And are Jinn present across the Islamic world?

**Sabrina Al-sayed** 13:12

Yeah, they are, as it's an integral part of Islamic theology. Many societies who converted to the religion also adopted a belief in Jinn. Different societies and cultures took the Quranic explanation of supernatural being as confirmation of their own understanding. You will often find different characteristics and attributes of Jinn because of this, depending on where you are in the world. I had an English friend once say they believe Jinn could be an explanation to fairy in some European folklore. And by this I'm not talking about Tinkerbell but figures such as changelings, who feature in European folklore and are thought to afflict young children with ailments, sometimes abducting and replacing them altogether.

**Tom Fearon** 13:59

So why do you think that Jinn often get left out of conversations about Islam?

**Sabrina Al-sayed** 14:04

Well, I think from a European perspective, the narrative around Islam often leaves out conversations about spirituality and spirits. But I think for Muslims themselves, the existence of Jinn is taken as a given. So there's not so much discussion rather than retelling of stories.

**JC Niala** 14:26

So do you have any Jinn stories?

**Sabrina Al-sayed** 14:29

I've asked quite a few people in preparation for this episode. And my favourite is one of my mum’s. To set the scene. This particular incident happened in our hometown in Jeddah, before I was born. She had had an argument with my dad earlier, and went to have a nap in my sister's room for a temporary change of scenery. Before she went to bed, she had a shower decided to burn a rather special and expensive oud, rather than the usual over her hair, to cheer herself up. Shortly after this she went down for a nap and slept peacefully until she was suddenly awoken by something pulling her by her hair and onto the floor, and then dragging her across the room in literal circles. She was frightened and began reciting verses of the Quran until it stopped. She realised no one was in the room with her. When the ordeal was over, and she'd calmed down, she remembered a rumour, she was once told that the nanny, an old lady, who was the only other person in the house that day with her, had Jinns associated with her. And the reason she was attacked was because she didn't offer the nanny any of the special oud before burning it on herself. From that day forward, she always offered the nanny food before applying it to herself to appease the Jinns. My mom maintains they would Jinn. However, my sister a medic, says it was probably a form of sleep paralysis.

**JC Niala** 16:01

Gosh, it must have been both interesting and tricky to ask questions about Jinn, especially if these conversations acknowledge that ambiguous space between two worlds. So how do Jinn contributes to our understandings of Islam and art in Africa?

**Sabrina Al-sayed** 16:21

Again, it's so different depending on individuals and/or the society. Many are quite strict about not associating local culture with their religious practice, but some have continued and found ways to incorporate it. An example is a mask in the Horniman collection, used by the Dogon people from Mali. This one has a crest that is richly ornamented with cowrie shells and beads. The rest of the mask is made up of string and hair and is used in dance and live theatre. Despite its discouragement from classical Islamic scholars elsewhere, the scholars of Timbuktu, considered a major Islamic hub of the Golden Age, found ways for Islamic theology to supplement the cultural practices in the region, rather than to diminish them entirely.

**Tom Fearon** 17:12

And this brings to mind Mande musicians in Mali, who aim for musical mastery or power, known as an Ngaraya. This is a high accolade, and a characteristic often attributed to men. But it is thought that these musicians and often women to embrace Jinn to enhance their musical skills, but this is sometimes a dangerous relationship, which has the possibility to overwhelm the musician. So here, the music takes on a kind of supernatural quality that transcends the performer and incorporates the spiritual. And I think if we include religion into our understandings of history, and material culture, a different picture emerges.

**JC Niala** 17:54

It does allow us to look at things more deeply. Ngaraya is similar to the pact with the devil made by African American blues musician, Robert Johnson. In fact, this reminds me of an exhibition held at the Horniman called music and musical instruments in the world of Islam, in 1974. There was an album curated by the then curator, Jean Jenkins, which we will include in the link. Perhaps our listeners here would like to listen out for Jinn. So Tom, what do you think connects the gold trade, Islam, spirits, and art in Mali?

**Tom Fearon** 18:33

Well, I think this brings us back to our idiom of movement. As people, objects and religions move, spirits move with them. material culture and religion are almost always entangled. And when we look beyond the materiality of the object, we can start to appreciate the histories, ideas, and spiritualities, which animate these objects. And although it might seem ephemeral, when working with collections, I like to follow these spiritualities when exploring the histories and uses of objects

**Sabrina Al-sayed** 19:07

I agree Tom, for me, the stories raised from these objects show a different part of Islamic history and understanding that we often aren't taught about. What many people don't know is that Africa was the first part of the world Islam was spread too, after the Prophet Muhammad- peace be upon him- and his people were forced to leave Mecca. The perception of Islam is often cast through Middle East whilst unfortunately, the black African contribution to its rich history is often under-looked. Uncovering and sharing these stories has been both an emotional and spiritual process for me to thank you for having me.

**JC Niala** 19:48

And thank you so much for joining us today.

**Tom Fearon** 19:57

Thank you for listening to this episode of Afro Historyscapes podcast, with Tom Fearon

**Sabrina A-Sayed**

Sabrina A-Sayed

**JC Niala** 20:05

And JC Niala. Shukran Sabrina for sharing with us the fascinating and often overlooked role ofJjinn in Islamic cosmology, art and history.

**Tom Fearon** 20:18

Join us next week when we'll be looking at Ethiopian orthodox crucifixes and the role of Christianity, as it has been embraced and shaped by African people throughout history. And in the present.

**JC Niala** 20:32

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