# Episode 8: Igbo and Nigerian Crafting Practices

A community research journey with Chinelo L. Njaka PhD

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

nigeria, collection, objects, stanfield, research, stories, colonial, yoruba, community, items, hat, absences, nigerian, hear, legacies, continue, biafra, traditional, nancy, photographs

## SPEAKERS

Chinelo L. Njaka, JC Niala, Tom Fearon

## Transcript

**JC Niala** 00:16

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

**Tom Fearon** 00:44

We 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're interested in African history, material culture, and museum collections, then this is the podcast for you.

**JC Niala** 01:16

We're your hosts JC Niala

**Tom Fearon** 01:20

and Tom Fearon

**JC Niala** 01:21

This week, we continue with our final theme, which is about technology. Last week, we heard from Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp, who is the curator at the Horniman, on the mobile technologies of milk processing.

**Tom Fearon** 01:35

It was so interesting to hear how European influence has introduced ideas about the relationship between milk and nutrition, and how this has impacted agricultural and technological practices associated with milk right across the African continent.

**JC Niala** 01:48

And this week, we hear from a community action researcher Chinelo L. Njaka. PhD about a different type of technology. Those used in crafting practices. Chinelo is a maker herself, which makes her research incredibly insightful.

**Tom Fearon** 02:06

Yes. Chinelo works with the popular Nancy Stanfield collection, photographs of which can be found on our website. Nancy Stanfield was a British teacher in Nigeria who took a lot of photographs, and documented infrastructure and industry in Nigeria. Around the time Nigeria attained independence in 1960. But we'll let Chinelo tell us more about her work with the collection.

**JC Niala** 02:29

Chinelo. We're delighted you can join us Welcome.

**Chinelo L. Njaka** 02:32

Hello. Great to be here.

**Tom Fearon** 02:35

We'd love to hear more about what drew you to the Nancy Stanfield collection.

**Chinelo L. Njaka** 02:38

To start at the beginning. I'm an avid crafter maker artist, and I have been since childhood. These days I focus on fiber and textiles. I sew garments, do patchwork quilt in both traditional and modern styles, knit, and even hand spin, mostly sheep's wool. That hobby and my sociological research background have led me to my interest in research and craft within Africa and the African diaspora. In my community action research, I am exploring Igbo in Nigeria and craft practices focusing on fiber and textile arts. When I began I started with an Igbo hat that I have, which caught my eye in mind when I first returned to Nigeria as an adult in 2009. So that's the first thing I looked for when starting my project. As a community action researcher. I couldn't find the hat or really any of the immediate items that I was curious about. So I started looking wider to see what crafts were present in the Horniman's collection. I first found some objects from Nancy Stanfield's collections such as indigo, adire spindles for spinning cotton by hand. But what really drew me to her collection was coming across her photos, which included some of the objects in use, especially seeing Nigerian women preparing and spinning cotton next to the hand spindles or seeing artisans displaying their Indigo dyed adire. Next to the tools of the process was a really exciting connection of human to object. I also thought about how crafting spinning in this case, but also more generally ties women in these specific examples together throughout history. Even though the girls and women featured in the photographs are more likely Yoruba and I am Igbo, as Nigerians and as Nigerian women, I felt a special kinship and connection that fills me with a sense of unspeakable pride. The joy that comes from communal making, and not only exists across space, but also across time.

**JC Niala** 04:26

The two spindles that Chinelo mentions can be found in Collections Online at object number 28.11.66/33. And there are also links on the page that accompanies this podcast to the photos that she talks about. It made me realize Chinelo that that's something that we don't often think about with clothes that we wear, the hands that made them and the person who those hands belong to

**Tom Fearon** 04:59

Indeed. But you also mentioned that there were things in the collection that you were looking for that you were not able to find. What were they?

**Chinelo L. Njaka** 05:06

The main thing was this Igbo hat, which I absolutely love. It's called okpu agu, which can be translated to English as the leopard hat. Okpu agu is worn by men. Traditionally, events and outings, is a knitted hat that usually uses the colors of red, white and black, and it's alternating patches of red, and black and white stripes is an abstracted representation of a leopard. I am still in the process of researching okpu agu, wanting to learn more about the traditional materials and production of the hat. As the ones that have come across more contemporarily have been mass produced and are made of synthetic acrylic yarns rather than natural fibers of wool, cotton or other fleece or plant materials.

**JC Niala** 05:46

I can see how you might have been hoping to find a link between the contemporary mass produced hats and the more traditional hats. But there was more that did not meet what you expected to see in the textiles collections.

**Chinelo L. Njaka** 05:57

More broadly, though, I found very limited examples of patchwork in the collections which I assume would have been used as a way to repair clothing, as well as create larger useable pieces of fabric from smaller pieces of fabric scraps. There are a couple of clothing items I found that have patchwork in them. So it is really interesting to see worn clothing alongside more pristine collected items. I also didn't find any examples of Nigerian knitting in the collections, be it materials or fabric. Weaving is a major method for clothing making within Nigeria. So it was not surprising that there are many examples of woven items within the collection. But I remained surprised at the absence of knitting, especially given that some traditional Igbo items are needed. What is also striking to me even more broadly, is that there is very little Igbo presence in the collection. For the purposes of my community action research project. I have had to widen my focus from Igbo to Nigeria as evil items are largely absent from the Horniman's collection.

**JC Niala** 06:54

Why do you think that is?

**Chinelo L. Njaka** 06:57

Speaking about the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria Igbo people are a somewhat marginalized group and I wonder if that is reflected in the collection. Nancy Stanfield lived in Nigeria between 1948 and 1967. During that time, Nigeria was granted full independence from British colonial rule on the 1st October 1960. During the next seven years, the young nation experienced political unrest that culminated in the Biafra war. From 1967 to 1970. Nancy Stanfield lived in western Nigeria, which is a Yoruba region, so it makes sense that most of her collection would be from that part of the country and exploring the culture she was most embedded within. With the unrest of the 1960s and even onward, travel and collection or exchange of objects may have been limited by geopolitical issues of the time. In my limited experience with the country. I have spent time in the Hausa Fulani north, the Europe of Southwest and the Igbo south east and the stark differences of infrastructure likely makes Igboland more difficult to travel to than the other two regions. Although I love it and has very personal connection and resonance with me. It is not a tourist destination by any means. And most people wouldn't travel there unless they had a specific reason such as to see family or for education. My understanding is that this persistent lack of infrastructure can be traced at least in part to the Biafra war and slow development afterwards. So although disappointing to me, I can understand that there may be multiple historical and practical reasons why the Horniman collection does not have large Igbo representation.

**JC Niala** 08:28

It's really important to talk about Biafra, as it still has profound resonance and an ongoing legacy today. And in terms of internationally significant cultural heritage, Igbo peoples have gifted the world so many outstanding writers, such as Christopher Okigbo, Oladuah Equiano and of course Chinua Achebe. Especially in this context, why do you think the absences of Ebro representation from the Horniman collections matters so much?

**Chinelo L. Njaka** 08:57

Igbo stories, along with many smaller ethnic groups within Nigeria are part of Nigeria story, as the country has been defined by colonial processes. Whilst I think that seeing Nigeria in more mainstream spaces and being more present in the popular imagination is a positive thing. As an Igbo I often feel a bit slighted or marginalised when, for example, Yoruba culture is assumed to be synonymous with Nigeria as a whole. Legacies of the Biafra war complicate this for me personally, but I think there is a remaining colonial gaze that seeks to homogenize the foreign or the other, rather than immediately recognize the rich diversity and vibrancy that is easily afforded to perceptions of the colonial self. Often when there is general mentions or depictions of Nigeria in mass, and now social media, it is one that I am not familiar with, because I'm not Yoruba. There are wonderful aspects of Yoruba culture, clothing, religion, music, and cuisine just to name a few. But equally, those underrepresented cultures that remain absent also make up the culture and story of Nigeria. As the great Igbo writer, Chinua Achebe, said in 1994 interview in the Paris Review, there is that great proverb that "until Lions have their own histories, the history of the hunts will always glorify the hunter." This speaks to the inherent power of canonical and popular histories. And perhaps looking at the proverb more I wonder what the lions would have to say about their experiences of strange animals coming into their habitat and hurling items at them that kill members of their pride, they are only trying to protect. These apps and stories, narratives points of view objects photographs, mean that there are countless untold histories to hear and learn from. At present, we can identify, talk about and research some of them. But as time goes on, collective recollection, and investigation may continue to wane and what might be identifiable as absences today, will go completely unnoticed in the future, those stories will sadly be lost.

**Tom Fearon** 10:54

That's a profound way to extend that well known Igbo proverb. You know, this is why we feel that the work you and other community action researchers do is so important. It's a critical part of working to keep these stories alive.

**JC Niala** 11:07

I agree. And I also find it fascinating that your research process includes the technology of Igbo Proverbs, which is a technology that Achebe so generously wrote and spoke about. There's so many layers to your work, the use of technology of language and story to explore the technologies of making. But clearly carrying out the research was not all plain sailing, given the absences you've talked about. What is the some of the challenges involved in researching making on the African continent, and specifically Igbo makers?

**Chinelo L. Njaka** 11:40

The absences have been a significant challenge as I've had to broaden my research scope greatly to begin learning about Nigeria and crafters and makers. In addition to that, I think that language has been another significant challenge in my research. What began as a bilingual search between English and Igbo terminologies widen to trilingual when I have added Yoruba, and even more when I look at other regions of Nigerian crafting and making. While I'm more familiar with Igbo, I have very little grasp of other Nigerian languages. So this has been difficult yet interesting to build my vocabulary. Going back to the start when I searched for Igbo crafts, I found that there was inconsistency in the Horniman collection database about how geographically or culturally specific items were labeled. For example, one item might be listed as being from Nigeria, whilst another item might be from West Africa, or may even reference Igbo or Igboland and compounding this where the various spellings of Igbo. Colonial spellings of I-b-o, e-b-o and others are interesting to see as they firmly placed the object through a historical colonial lens. Whereas the correct spelling I-g-b-o, whereas the correct spelling i-g-b-o, may not be included on all items. So it took me a while to remember that searching I-b-o might yield more results. I suppose yet, one more colonial legacy that I thought about was that there were also Igbo people who live outside of Nigeria such as Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. For my research, rather than expanding explicit searches to these countries, I widen it along geopolitical lines, which means that I lose some Igbo ethno cultural focus as I focus within national boundaries.

**Tom Fearon** 13:17

I think that there are many community researchers who can relate to this having to navigate colonial borders and documentation. As well as the challenges, was there anything that surprised you during the course of your research?

**Chinelo L. Njaka** 13:28

Yes, the whole research experience has been a wonderful surprise. I'm surprised that I did not find okpu agu or any okpu Igbo (meaning Igbo hat) in the collection. It is not so surprising that Nancy Stanfield didn't collect any herself. But I'm surprised that the Horniman has not obtained traditional Igbo hats from other donors or acquisitions as of yet. A pleasant surprise has been photography as objects as I mentioned earlier, for some reason, I assumed that objects would be things rather than images. And including photography is a wonderful way of capturing the vibrancy of an object in its natural or usual context, rather than behind a glass panel when displayed, or in an archival box when stored. There are so many surprises, but I think I will add only one more. And that is the seemingly infinite ways to engage with both Nancy's Stanfield's collections, as well as the ornaments collection and Collections and Archives more widely. Going through the Community Action Research program, we were fortunate to hear from many artists, curators, museum staff, and other community researchers on their projects, their methods, their philosophies, their approaches and their reflections. It was very inspiring and has encouraged me to continue on with this project long after its official close later in the year. Each object tells at least one story, I look forward to the surprising tales that will continue to share with me.

**JC Niala** 14:44

It's wonderful to hear that you're going to be carrying on your research even after the end of the community action research project. Thank you so much for lifting the lid on what it's been like to participate in the community action research program as we've had a lot of questions about it.

**Tom Fearon** 14:59

And it's also been really good to hear about your approach to uncovering the stories of Igbo technologies, and specifically working with absence in the collection. How absence can be a tool in and of itself to understand wider political contexts and colonial legacies

**JC Niala** 15:19

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of Afro historyscapes with me, JC Niala

**Tom Fearon** 15:26

Tom Fearon

**Chinelo L. Njaka** 15:28

and Chinelo L. Njaka, PhD.

**Tom Fearon** 15:31

Join us next week, as we discuss with Community Action researcher, Yvette Waweu as we talk about African headrests, which have also been called dream machines, and her Afro futurist perspective on them,

**JC Niala** 15:43

Yvette participated in the pilot community action research project in 2020, so it will be great to catch up with her. It's also going to be the final episode in our theme of technology. And the final in the Afro historyscapes series, and they get a little emotional.

**Tom Fearon** 16:00

I can't believe we've come to the end of the series already. The next episode is going to be a good one.

**JC Niala** 16:06

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