Episode 9

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**SPEAKERS**

Yvette Waweru, JC Niala, Tom Fearon

**JC Niala** 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the ninth and final episode of the Afro Historyscapes podcast series, where we give you a different perspective on African history. We tell the story of African history 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 in histories, we open a different window into African worlds.

**Tom Fearon** 00:44

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 researchers. Each month, we focus on a different theme. 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. We're your hosts, JC Niala, and Tom Fearon

**JC Niala** 01:22

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

**Tom Fearon** 01:34

This week, we continue with our final theme, which is about technology. Last week, we heard from Chinelo Njaka, PhD, there who is a community action researcher on technologies used in crafting practices.

**JC Niala** 01:47

And she also talked about the mechanics of carrying out work on African and Caribbean collections held in European museums, thinking about how to manage absence, and issues of representation in the collections.

**Tom Fearon** 02:00

Yes, she lifted the lid on what it's been like to participate in the community action research project, which has been taking place at the Horniman from 2020 to 2021. It's a project that provided training and support to community members so they could carry out research of their interests on the collections.

**JC Niala** 02:20

And this week, we're joined by another community action researcher who took part in the project in 2020. Yvette Waeru carried out research on headrest in the collections, which resulted in the making of an incredible, Afro-futuristic short film that you can find on the podcast page. She joins us today from Nairobi, Kenya, where she's currently based

**Tom Fearon** 02:42

Yvette, we're delighted that you can join us, welcome.

**Yvette Waweru** 02:45

Hello, great to be here.

**JC Niala** 02:46

We would love to hear more about what drew you to working with headrests in the collections.

**Yvette Waweru** 02:52

As someone born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya, I had never seen or heard about these objects. They never came up during my foundational years at school, even in art and design classes that I loved and enjoyed for so long. Through my architecture days at university in the US abroad, I spent hours rummaging through books and websites that gave little information on historical design approaches and elements to African design. I didn't have enough design precedents to explore my interests. And I defaulted to looking at Western culture or nature for inspiration. Coming across these objects gave me access to pre-colonial African design, which was hard to find online, it was exciting to explore these strange pillars and understand their function and aesthetics, and more importantly, the people behind them.

**Tom Fearon** 03:40

That's a really good point about how hard it can be to find information about pre-colonial African design, especially online. What sort of information were you able to find out about the headrests you were working with? And where did you find it?

**Yvette Waweru** 03:55

The Horniman Museum website provided a good amount of information about the headrests in their collection, I checked out a total of 23 made by communities primarily from southern and eastern Africa. There were three from ancient Egypt, an example of which is accsession number 21.81. In Eastern Africa, the headrests show up often with pastoralist communities such as Dinka peoples of South Sudan as seen at accession number 2019.63, Turkana peoples at accession number 2010.7, and Samburu peoples of Kenya at accession number 1972.119. There is a Karamajong headrest from Uganda at accession number 2003.599, and a Somali headrest at accession number (2013.156). Southern African headrests included a Zulu one from South Africa at accession number 2676 and a Zimbabwean Shona headrest at accession number 20.13. The Zulu and Shona headrests are from the great Kingdoms of Zululand and Zimbabwe. From Horniman's website, I learned that the headrests functioned as a lot more than just pillows; they had multifunctional, ritualistic and even sacred purposes depending on the culture. In the Shona community, for example, headrests served to protect men's hairstyles, and in Zulu traditions, they functioned as part of a woman's dowry. In many cultures across the African continent, the groom and his family are responsible for providing the bride’s family with gifts, money amongst other things as a condition for the marriage to be able to take place. In both Shona and Zulu communities, headrests had sacred meaning to the owners, and were seen as a seat for the spirit of the owners once they passed, with the headrest being buried with the deceased. Through further research I learned that this practice was also performed in Ancient Egypt. Pastoralist communities of eastern Africa also had several uses of headrests given that they could only travel with a limited number of objects. They used them as pillows, stools, protection from creepy crawlers, as containers, and even hairstyle protectors. To get more specific information on the headrests and their users, I had to dig through blogs and cultural websites that I came across. I also found plenty of information from other museum collections, from private collection holders like randafricanart.com and social media pages. Analysing the objects themselves also brought in some information. I also checked out historical videos from places like the National Archives and British Pathé to find historical photographs and videos to contextualize the objects. One example is the intricate hairstyles worn by Zulu ladies from a 1931 film in the British Pathé archives. It was very interesting to see the styles that needed to be maintained and protected from damage using the headrests.

**JC Niala** 06:57

I could have done with one of those headrests when I was a teenager and I used to wear all sorts of different hairstyles, it would have been really useful.

**Tom Fearon** 07:06

And I noticed that you worked a lot with pastoral communities' headrests. What have you learned about their lifestyles from working with their material culture?

**Yvette Waweru** 07:15

The pastoralist communities clearly needed as much multifunctionality with these objects as possible as they spend a lot of time on the move. This multifunctionality is expressed in the design. Their headrests are light and have strap handles for carrying them around, for example the Turkana Ekicholong (found at accession number 2010.7) and the Dinka Thocc (found at accession number 2019.63). I found it interesting that the three-legged design of the Samburu headrest is because it also serves as a stool. I have been exposed to these three-legged stools before, but never saw them used in other ways. The Somali Barkin (found at accession number 2013.156), which is also attributed to the Boni community, is a great example of art meeting function and ritual in headrest use by pastoralist communities. In order to keep the herder vigilant, the headrests have a small base making them unstable, so that the resting person can't fully fall asleep without falling over. It is also made from light but sturdy wood. From the small circular base, two flattened and curved supports rise to meet another flattened and curved base where the head or neck rests. The inscriptions on the headrests are said to be a form of shorthand for a prayer for protection of the sleeper, reflecting the Islamic influence in the region. These headrests are also used on the wedding night of couples where the groom gives his bride a sum of money under her headrest to purchase jewellery that would indicate her new status. All these multiple uses come together to serve more than just one function, which drew me further to the headrests from these communities.

**JC Niala** 08:58

I really love the way that you have drawn out the complexity of these objects. To me, they are a mirror of many objects from the African continent, they may seem like they do one thing, but it actually turns out that they do many different things. It also strikes me that these communities you describe we're living really well. You don't take time to make a functional object look beautiful if you're struggling. But this question of art and functionality leads me to another question. Nowadays there are many questions about how headrests should be categorized. They're everyday objects, but we've discussed they also beautiful and as such seen as works of art. How do you see them?

**Yvette Waweru** 09:41

I see them as all these things and don't believe they should be placed in a single category given that the different cultures had different and multiple uses of them. In some ways, they are personal and sacred objects that are not for public show or consumption as most art work is today. If I imagine connecting with my great grandmother through this object, I certainly would keep it stored safely, and never let anyone use it. In other ways, they are beautiful sculptures that are an expression of personal style for travel, like a hat would be. Given the diversity of use, I think it is ok to not categorise them.

**Tom Fearon** 10:19

That's a really good point is that a defying categorisation is also something that you work with in your own practice. In your output, an amazing video that can be seen on the podcast page, you projected the headrests into the future. Where did you draw your inspiration?

**Yvette Waweru** 10:35

My inspiration actually came from watching a lot of Sci-Fi short films on the YouTube page, DUST, during lockdown in 2020. There were so many ideas from so many film-makers who triggered my mind into imagining alternate realities. This led to projecting the past into the future by thinking about these historic headrests, their meaning and function, being adapted to a time with much greater technological capability. In fact, some of these ideas could likely be achieved now with the right research and development on making headrests suitable for sleep tracking or virtual reality, for example. As I watched the Sci-Fi films, I found that the intent with a lot of the technological ideas was to make life easier for humans. I then thought about the traditional ideas on headrests and how they could improve my life such as using it to upload and store my chosen memories. This is of course extremely personal and sacred to me, and could be left to my dearest descendants, just as past cultures have done in alternate ways. I would especially love a headrest that could do my hair as I sleep.

**JC Niala** 11:43

I would definitely sign up for that as well! What a beautiful parallel you have drawn about how we are a humans. Whether in the past or even currently – we are always looking for ways to make objects that will make our lives easier and work better. Thinking about African collections and the future - what do you think Afrofuturism can bring to work on African collections held in European museums?

**Yvette Waweru** 12:12

As with my experience, Afrofuturism can engage with the objects as a source of inspiration. During my research process, I quickly realized that I was getting incorrect, incomplete, misunderstood, biased and even racist information that was coming from the colonial context. It is difficult to honour the people who created these objects and speak truth to their intent because of this. Rather than try to explain, I decided to be inspired. Some truths will forever remain locked in history, but we certainly have the chance to forge a different narrative in the future.

**Tom Fearon** 12:47

There are so many community researchers who can relate to this, I think, having to navigate colonial legacies in museum databases. You've left them and us with a really positive way to turn this challenge on its head.

**JC Niala** 13:00

Thank you so much for inspiring me with your thoughts about the way design principles can tell us a lot about the cultures that they come from.

**Tom Fearon** 13:08

And it's also been really good to hear about your approach to drawing inspiration from the collections that you can take into your work to create exciting visions for the future.

**JC Niala** 13:33

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

**Tom Fearon** 13:40

Tom Fearon

**JC Niala** 13:42

and Yvette Waweru.

**Tom Fearon** 13:45

And this is our final episode, we want to say a big thank you to all of our listeners. We appreciate all the comments and feedback that you've sent through. If you've enjoyed the series, we would be very grateful if you would leave us a good review on iTunes.

**JC Niala** 13:59

And I would like also like to extend thanks to all of the organisations that made this podcast possible through the Joint BME Events and Activities scheme administered by the Social History Society in partnership with Economic History Society, History UK, History of Education Society (UK), History Workshop Journal, Royal Historical Society, Society for the Study of Labour History and Women’s History Network.

**Tom Fearon** 14:28

And last but definitely not least thanks to all our Community Action Researchers, Curators and digital team at the Horniman Museum and Gardens. We started the series with looking at trade on the Swahili Coast moved on to religions across the continent and ended with technology. And not forgetting our special episode where Community researcher, Sherry Davis interviewed Jimbi Kanta about his incredible legacy of archaeological work on the Kenyan coast. So thank you to you all It has been a pleasure to share with you the stories that can be told from working with the objects in the Horniman’s collections. But finally I would like to thank you JC, this podcast wouldn’t be possible without your vision and it been a real pleasure to be involved!

**JC Niala** 15:11

Thank you, Tom. It's been such a joy to work on it with you. This has been Afro Historyscapes, always something new, Always has been always on the move.