**Community Conversations at the Horniman Museum**

**Episode 3: Intangible**

Tom Fearon: Hello, and welcome to the Community Conversations podcast with the Horniman Museum & Gardens, here we aim to provide you the listener with an insight into some of the challenges faced by community members and researchers.

Chinelo Njaka: And by community members we mean those users of the museum whose heritage is represented in the collections, the anthropology collection at the Horniman contains around 80,000 objects, only a fraction of which are on display. Located in South London the museum serves a diverse community who we feel should have equal and meaningful access to the objects, both on display and in storage. But often we hear that community members face unique challenges when accessing, researching, and contributing knowledge to the collections.

Sancha Gaere: For this mini podcast series we have been having conversations with community members, community researchers, and arts and heritage practitioners who have experience in navigating the barriers they have faced when working with the Horniman, as well as the heritage sector more broadly. These barriers are often due to the colonial histories of museums, including the Horniman and we feel it is important to begin removing these barriers, especially for community members. So you can also consider this podcast a resource for accessing the collections yourself.

Tom Fearon: Since the beginning of 2022 the Horniman has been working on developing a community support space, that would provide online resources and content aimed at increasing access for community members. This is a project funded by the museum’s association. Working with a group of African and Caribbean community members we’ve been listening to their concerns, to develop a space that begins to help navigate these issues.

Sancha Gaere: The podcast will provide an honest reflection on the shortcomings of existing museum knowledge and provide listeners with some of the tools they might need to engage with the collections on their own terms.

Chinelo Njaka: In this series we’ll be having conversations about access, thinking about how community members can share their unique knowledge about the collections, reflecting on intangible histories represented in the museum collections and we will also hear from community researchers about their own research journeys. And we’re your host, Chinelo L, Njaka, PhD.

Tom Fearon: Tom Fearon coordinator for the project at the Horniman.

Sancha Gaere: I’m Sancha Gaere, also a coordinator for the project.

Tom Fearon: Museum collections are often centred around material culture, the objects and artefacts at the Horniman for example enable us to learn about the rich cultures and histories of people from around the world through their objects.

Sancha Gaere: And lots of other museum collections do the same, but how much can these objects convey when presented in galleries, what stories, feelings and knowledge are left out, and whose version of history do they represent.

Tom Fearon: Although objects can tell us a lot about culture and history the history of collecting itself, and the colonial fascination with material culture means that much of the lived history and intangible aspects of heritage are underrepresented in museums like the Horniman.

Sancha Gaere: And by the intangible we mean the sounds, senses, feelings, stories and meanings associated with objects. Objects can mean different things to different people and we think it’s important that museums like the Horniman embrace those forms of heritage and understanding.

Tom Fearon: In this edition of the podcast we will discuss the importance of more intangible aspects of history, culture and heritage. And think about how we might be able to reclaim them from museum collections.

Sancha Gaere: Today we’re delighted to be joined by Zakia Sewell and Meghan Mills, Zakia is a broadcaster, producer, writer and DJ based in London, her varied work is across history, culture and sound, and has often dived into themes of identity and belonging, and ancestral experiences. Zakia’s documentary work explores some of the themes of the intangible including through audio storytelling. Meghan has been involved with the community research hub project and is currently doing a PhD in black British popular culture at the University of Leeds, she’s previously also worked at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge. A warm welcome to both of you. How are you both doing today?

Meghan Mills-Amissah: I’m good, I’m excited to be here [laughs].

Sancha Gaere: Thank you for joining us.

Zakia Sewell: Yeah, I’m good, I’m good, just getting used to the autumnal vibes still, slowly [all laugh].

Sancha Gaere: Oh definitely, well first I actually had a question for Zakia, your work as I mentioned in the brief description it actually explores some of the intangible aspects of culture and history, we were wondering what draws you to these themes, and in particular as a DJ and radio host what it is about music that you feel can convey a sense of belonging and identity?

Zakia Sewell: Yeah, I mean I think for me, yeah, it has always been through my love of music, I grew up in like a very musical household, I’ve always been collecting music, I’ve always been fascinated by it, but not just the sounds themselves, but the stories behind them. And I think music has also been quite an important way for me to reconnect with different aspects of my heritage and identity, like I am mixed British and Caribbean, and I didn’t really have that much connection with my Caribbean family growing up. So it was really like through the music and through in particular some like recordings that were made like on the island that my grandparents are from, that I discovered when I was sort in my early twenties that I was really able to sort of start investigating and learning more about this culture of Kariku that I had been quite disconnected from. So music has always been a vehicle I guess for then discovering more about other traditions like, you know, ritual, dance, you know, kind of folk traditions, seasonal customs, etc, etc. It’s always been, yeah, music has always been kind of the first, the entry point. And I guess with music, you know, it is, it’s about that thing which has felt, that thing which you can’t put your finger on, that thing that elicits an emotional response, or a memory in a way that’s very different to reading about a particular traditional culture, or history. So I think it’s that kind of immediacy, that almost intuitive response that you have to music that I think that’s part of the reason it’s been that gateway.

Tom Fearon: Yeah, I think those kind of visceral kind of embodied responses can be really powerful. But I guess a question to both of you would be why do you think that these kind of more intangible aspects of heritage and culture, and history are so important, Meghan?

Meghan Mills-Amissah: Well I think Zakia’s sort of nailed it on the head, I really liked how she said, described music as like a vehicle, because I think that a lot of people can experience popular culture in that way. I think for me personally, so I’m Ghanian but I mostly grew up here in England, and having like a mixed sense of being black and British and also Ghanian, reconnecting to my culture through music, is something that’s very personal to me, and I think different people have different ways that they can sort of personalise these intangible aspects of culture. I think it very much shows that culture is extremely fluid, means different things for different people at different points in their life and it’s very continuous as well. So yeah I think that’s a big point for me, how fluid it can be.

Tom Fearon: Yeah, I think you both pick up on those kind of more intangible aspects of your own heritage, particularly kind of questioning what it means to be British, and I think this is something that kind of doesn’t quite get questioned or represented in museums. But Meghan as someone who’s been involved in the Horniman, and as a student of culture, history and museum practice, what do you feel gets left out of the representation of objects in museum collections?

Meghan Mills-Amissah: Ooh [laughs] so this is a very good question that I still battle with. I think before getting involved with museums I was quite naïve in what gets left out, I think I was very – I very much had the perspective that if it’s not there then it just doesn’t exist, and then once I started getting more into the museum work and like collection practices I did sort of nuance it a bit more, and it sort of became questions of like how do we display absence as well. So things like our objects or belongings are they simply lost, or shall we look at them as being like censored, or are they being returned, or are they simply being removed, yeah. Working with the Horniman and just in other museums, a lot has been missed out, and I think that’s probably largely due to provenance work as well and funding. I think in terms of funding museums currently are doing better than ever in trying to get good representation of objects, the funding is mostly short term as well, so where like people are carrying out great research topics and stuff, on like provenance, you know, where objects come from, how we can better represent them. There aren’t really that many long term sustainable goals, I think.

Sancha Gaere: Zakia, do you have any experiences of museum collections, especially the intangible aspects of heritage and anything you may think is missing?

Zakia Sewell: I mean yeah, no, I mean only as a visitor, I mean I’ve kind of – anyone who’s grown up in London has been like, you know, I’ve been so lucky to have all these incredible museums all around and going to the British Museum and you know, various other things as a younger person and then getting older and, yeah, becoming more aware of those absences. And I remember, well I went to Colombia and I went to, I can’t remember the name of the museum but I went to this museum and it was so radical, I mean it felt so radical to have certain histories kind of just dealt with head on, and in a very kind of bold and powerful way. And I think that kind of made me realise how much is missing in the UK in terms of the legacies of colonialism and slavery which is so enmeshed as you said at the start, Tom, with that whole kind of business of collection. So that was quite a long time ago and I do feel like it has shifted, I mean I was at the Tate Britain only yesterday and I was really struck by how many of kind of placards on the paintings, of portraits of wealthy English people from the 17th and 18th Century. It mentioned how they got their wealth, and all the kind of colonial collections, and I was quite struck by that shift. So I do think it is, it’s changing. But in regards to representing intangible heritage, I mean it’s a bit of a contradiction in terms, what we’re talking about is something that cannot be fixed in time, that cannot be measured really, although that in a way something’s always lost when those attempts to do those things are made. So I think it is really, really difficult to begin to capture these things which are sort of of a moment, they’re living, they’re breathing traditions, and they’re sort of – as soon as we start to try and make them fixed I think we’re kind of in some way damaging them. So I think it remains a big question, how to represent those things in a way that feels sort of authentic.

Sancha Gaere: Zakia we also wanted to touch on your radio series, My Albion, which was incredible, for any listeners of the podcast, please do go and check that out. Zakia covered some themes of belonging and British identity, especially in finding new meanings and connections in Britishness. And there was in one episode that you specifically said belonging is one thing, and ownership is another, and we think this really resonates with the museum collections. So we were wondering if you had any thoughts as to how community members can reclaim those intangible aspects of heritage that often get lost and over formalised, which is something you started to touch on in your previous answer.

Zakia Sewell: One of the things that really struck me when I was making the Albion series, was this sense that you know, Britain is not really seen to have intangible heritage, you know, when we go to the British Museum, for example I went to the Stone Henge exhibition which they had there earlier this summer. And I was quite like amazed and like this sort of moment of realisation that I’d never really seen like British stuff in the British Museum [laughs]. Just all these artefacts that came from some kind of crazy quarry in Leeds, or a little talisman, a little kind of human shaped talisman found in a peat bog in wherever. And it struck me that, that’s such a rare experience, so often whether we’re talking about tangible or intangible heritage, it’s often the sort of exoticized othering collections from remote places that we see in cabinets, and what not. So particularly with this sort of sense of the intangible, I mean it’s quite interesting that Britain don’t have that UNESCO intangible heritage sort of protection on any of our traditions because they’re not deemed to be of value or important. So I guess one of the things that was really important to me in that series was the kind of searching out, instead of people looking elsewhere for those traditions, and I do think it’s also connected to living in a kind of hypo rational materialistic world, a lot of people are sort of seeking the intangible, they’re seeking the sort of ritual, they’re seeking the things that are passed down in bodies and families through generations that are kind of missing currently. People like to go and find them elsewhere, and that always poses problems of, you know, appropriation and what not. So it was quite interesting to think well what’s here, and if you know, if there are people who are from here who want to delve into their own sort of history and finding those rituals or those dances or those you know, traditional songs from were they are from, you know, where would we begin to look. I think it’s also incredibly important that we are exposed to different cultures, and I think that is one of the amazing things about museums, not to take that away, but I think that there really needs to be a kind of look at what belongs to here [laughs], particularly in the face of calls for various objects and you know, to be returned to where they were often stolen from. What’s from here, that is worth looking at, and what can we learn about our nation and our history from taking a look in those areas.

Sancha Gaere: Honestly such a food for thought answer, and yeah I guess then the beauty of people who have like multiple places that they identify with can then, through the lens of what you were saying, they can think of like past British experiences, they can think of things from other countries as well, so I guess that encouragement and that space hopefully to have museums to explore both is really important. So yeah.

Tom Fearon: Yeah, I agree, and I think your work in particular Zakia, kind of questions or embraces the kind of different ways people relate to Britishness, and actually there is no one way of being British and it’s always contested. And perhaps museums can kind of embrace those multiple meanings, I think that sometimes objects kind of get represented as belonging to one particular culture and they’re kind of as Meghan mentioned they’re kind of fixed in time. So yeah I mean Meghan in your experience of working in museums and kind of thinking about the narrative that kind of gets produced in museums, how can embracing the intangible challenge those kind of fixed narratives?

Meghan Mills-Amissah: These are such interesting questions, even like hearing Zakia talk made me think a lot more about different levels of like ownership, especially within museums, and I think it’s – even stands from basic things from like labels, or like terminology. Like I know at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology one thing that we tried to do was to use more like localised terms for objects as well, to try and remove the sense of like authority and like Britishness from museum collections. I think generally the narratives in the projects that I have been involved in, within museums are quite positive, again because there is funding and they are like specific projects to try and make these collections more accessible, and try and find a bit more about the provenance. Trying to make them more engaging as well with local communities. I think again the museums I’ve worked with I think they’ve also done very well in trying to communicate with communities and get them to interpret collections in their own way, you know, like really telling stories in their own terms, on their own way. Whether or not that’s like from performing arts, or like I think we had some spoken word as well as a form of like engagement. So I think there are loads of different ways that people can engage with the museum collections, especially like anything from African heritage, or British. I think as you said it was all largely contested, but I think so far the narrative is definitely going towards the right way, there’s still a lot more work that needs to be done though, obviously.

Tom Fearon: Yeah, and I think museums hold a lot of responsibility in kind of doing that work, of kind of thinking through their own histories, you know, the Horniman for example was started by Frederick Horniman who made a lot of his money in the tea trade. So we can kind of think about the colonial and imperial legacies of the Horniman collection itself, but like you said yeah that it’s really good that conversations can happen and platforms can be created where people are able to express those more intangible feelings associated with museum collections. Zakia, I have a question for you in particular, but I think Meghan you could probably speak to this as well. A lot of your work starts from the personal, and I think listeners who are interested to explore the museums can resonate with this, museums are a great way for people to kind of learn more about their own history, learn more about themselves. So I think maybe based upon your own kind of research journeys and explorations, what advice would you give to somebody coming to the museum to kind of go on a similar journey?

Zakia Sewell: These sort of fascinations with history and heritage and culture and objects and traditions from the distant past have been very enmeshed with my own sort of identity struggles [laughs]. And wanting a sense of belonging or understanding or knowing of self and where I come from, that sort of reaches a bit further back, and yeah it’s been a kind of combination of it’s on the one hand it’s a sort of journey of research and facts, and on the other it’s a very kind of personal and felt thing. And I guess it’s that sort of journey of exploration is going to be very different for everyone, I think it’s – you know, there’s a – there is a kind of magic in objects and in songs, and so you know, why a certain tradition or a certain object or a certain song springs out to you and speaks to you while others don’t. And it’s not always necessarily connected to your own history or heritage, it is something quite that can be difficult to pin down. But yeah I’d say my advice would be just kind of follow your instincts, and like lean into that magic and mystery of why we are drawn to certain things, and I think it is important to think about appropriation and to think about the sort of politics and the difficult histories and contexts of a lot of what we’ve been talking about. But also to not let an idea of who you are or what you should like, or what you should be drawn to, get in the way of an instinctive connection to an object or a tradition. So yeah, I guess that would be my advice. I think it’s, there’s a magic as I said, there’s a magic to the sort of exploration and to behold an object that has sort of been part of a, this history or that knowing that, you know, all these different people from all different walks of life have encountered this object and had a different – or a song whatever, and had a different experience with it. So I think leaning into that, and the magic and mystery I think would be my advice, although it’s not very practical [laughs].

Sancha Gaere: Honestly you said a lot of inspiring things there because it’s our hope that some people that will listen to this podcast might be starting their own research journey, so honestly that was some affirming words, thank you so much Zakia. And Meghan we were wondering if you had anything that you would suggest to anyone starting looking into history and heritage?

Meghan Mills-Amissah: Ooh, I think one thing that I struggled with the most is comparing like my lived experience to like my academic experience, or like just experience for the museums generally. So I think one thing that I really want to hone in on, and advise people is that your lived experience is so important, probably the most important thing, especially with like intangible cultures, and experiences. So definitely as like, sorry as Zakia said, lean into the magic of exploration and everything, yeah, you can use yourself and your positionality as a framework before you go into like researching. And there’s no wrong or right way I don’t think to create your own framework, as long as it does come from you challenging everything, even if it is challenging yourself, your lived experience is so important, so relevant, and will always be relevant.

Tom Fearon: And I really like the idea of kind of embracing those magical qualities of either museums or experience, and kind of really kind of embracing them. I always knew a conversation about the intangible would be quite intangible, but I think we’re starting to get down to something [all laugh].

Sancha Gaere: I guess the final one to end on from our end would be if you had any thoughts as to how museums can embrace the personal and intangible?

Meghan Mills-Amissah: Personally definitely invite more community members, and there should also be like some kind of like learning resources that should come out of it, and I think it is definitely important to educate as many people as possible, and that might not necessarily be through a label, or like I don’t know, a comment on a website or something, this can take – form many different ways. And also making sure that it is like a coproduction as well, I think we definitely need to decentre massive institutional voices from stuff like this, so yeah, really giving back agency. I think as I mentioned before making sure that communities can tell their own stories, in their own times as well.

Sancha Gaere: That actually ties in really nicely to a conversation we had in the previous podcast where one of our guests, JC, was talking about museums becoming more facilitators as opposed to being too authoritative in their voice, so thank you so much for sharing Meghan.

Zakia Sewell: Yeah, I mean yeah I would agree, I think to me there’s the two things that come to mind, one is how the best way to represent these things that are very difficult to represent once they’re taken out of their context, let’s say it’s you know, the ritual represented by an object, or a dance tradition. Like how do you start to represent that, or you could do one, make one film of it but that’s just one particular – you know, that was just captured in a particular moment in time, that doesn’t represent all of the kind of, the cultural world. I guess there are some mediums that lend themselves better to representing that sort of thing than others, and you know, yeah like more audio visual elements. I’ve thought about this a lot, like when I was doing the Albion series I was like how could we start to represent, even begin to represent something like Britishness, and the only way is to sort of have some multi-layered, multi 10,000 screen sort of situation. Where you’ve got all of the opposing things sort of all present at once. So I don’t even know if that’s worth doing, but leaning into the mediums that are kind of, you know, sound is always incredibly evocative, and leaning into the mediums that are – that seem to lend themselves more to that, which is intangible. But also I agree with you Meghan, in that really it should be about creating new experiences, creating new traditions, creating new – that new sort of catalogues through the experience, through bringing people together and sharing their, you know, as opposed to fixating on representing that which is difficult to pin down in the first place.

Meghan Mills-Amissah: And I also think you made such an important point as well about not fastening it to like a specific moment, because it is intangible, the whole point of it is being fluid, right, that it’s a continuous thing. So I think making sure that things are like regularly updated, and people are always involved and have opportunities to be involved at multiple stages as well is also really important, to make sure it is fluid as you said.

Tom Fearon: Yeah, and I think you know, this is just one conversation in time, so hopefully these conversations continue in the future. But yeah Meghan and Zakia thank you so much for joining us today.

Meghan Mills-Amissah: Thanks for having us.

Zakia Sewell: Thank you.

Tom Fearon: Thank you for listening to the Community Conversations podcast.

Chinelo Njaka: We hope these conversations are useful to those of you who are currently exploring the collections, as well as any listeners who are interested to engage with the Horniman.

Sancha Gaere: We’re always looking to develop our community support space so if you have any suggestions or feedback please do let us know. You can find all of the details alongside this podcast.

Tom Fearon: We would like to thank all of our guests and collaborators that made this podcast possible.