Episode 1: Indian Ocean trade routes from the Swahili East African Coast

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**SPEAKERS**

JC Niala, Tom Fearon

**JC Niala** 00:16

Hello, and welcome to the first 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, which have often been hidden throughout history. Together with the objects and histories, we open a different window into African worlds.

**Tom Fearon** 00:51

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** 01:28

We're your hosts, JC Niala

**Tom Fearon** 01:31

and Tom Fearon and today, we're going to open the series with the theme of trade by exploring trade routes on the Swahili East African coast.

**JC Niala** 01:41

This is Afro Historyscapes. always something new, always has been, always on the move. This is Afro Historyscapes. And I'm JC Niala for acting keeper of anthropology at the Horniman Museum and Gardens in London. Let me take you back to mediaeval times, and the world's gold trade. It was controlled from the island of Kilwa Kisiwani on the Swahili coast. Kilwa Kisiwani is a small island off the coast of what is modern day Tanzania.

**Tom Fearon** 02:23

The Swahili coast in East Africa, which lies along the Indian Ocean stretches from Somalia in the north to Mozambique in the south, a distance of over 1800 miles and was for over a millennium, a bustling area, dotted with spectacular city states, where people carried out trade with other African civilizations, but also across the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia, and as far as China.

**JC Niala** 02:52

That's Tom Fearon and together, we're part of a team that runs the community action research project at the Horniman Museum. It's a project that supports community members, people like you, to carry out research of their interest on the collections. As part of our work, we often get asked questions about objects in the collections and what they mean, or what stories they tell. So we've made this podcast to share some of those answers with you.

**Tom Fearon** 03:22

When we refer to specific objects in the collections, we will give its museum number, which you can use to look up the objects on the Collections Online at the Horniman website. You can also find the numbers in the transcript accompanying this podcast.

**JC Niala** 03:37

But back to the Swahili coast, and the amazing trade networks that were centred on this cosmopolitan strip of land on the East African coast. It connected more diverse people and traded a wider variety of goods than the Silk Road. But one of the reasons that it's less well known is because it was a complex set of trade routes that did not directly involve Europe. It was active from about 1000 CE to 1200 before a slight dip, only for it to surge again in the 14th and 15th centuries. The trade involved commodities such as ivory, grain, timber, books, cotton, spices, ceramics, silk, and gold. This Swahili coast was also home to a much less researched barbaric trade in people. Although exact figures are contested, countless enslaved people were also bought and sold in markets on the East African coast.

**Tom Fearon** 04:47

So JC what objects in the collections lead you to researching these trade routes?

**JC Niala** 04:54

Well, there were three objects in particular. Two ornately designed coffee. parts, one in silver and the other in copper. Their museum numbers are 28.11.53/1, and 2.5.60/33, respectively. Although they are 19th century object, the precious metals in them do tell the story of the historical trade routes of the Swahili coast, and their Arabic inspired designs give hints as to the cosmopolitanism of the city states of the region. You can find these objects on Collections Online on the Horniman website. But I'll really be focusing on the third object, which is also a good example of some of the difficulties community members face when working with colonial era archives.

**Tom Fearon** 05:51

Okay, so why is that?

**JC Niala** 05:55

Well, this object is a cigarette card that was made by the Melachrino Cigarette Company in 1925. From a series that they called ‘exotic peoples’.

**Tom Fearon** 06:07

I'm familiar with cigarette cards. I think my dad has some at home, but mostly just motorbikes, I think, but cigarette cars themselves were traded and continued to be traded today, and also have their own fascinating history. There's a collection of these Melachrino Cigarette cards in the Horniman’s collections. An advertisement from the New Yorker magazine on the 13th of October 1928, describes the ‘mild’ and ‘cool’ Melachrino. No cigarettes as the one cigarette smoked the world over.

**JC Niala** 06:38

There were definitely positioning themselves as global. And so they used global images to attract consumers in Europe and North America. But while some of the images may have been beautiful, it's their interpretation of them, that's inappropriate today. The card I'm referring to has museum number 2011.44.29. And as an example of a museum object that holds a lot of information, but it's also challenging for community members to research.

**Tom Fearon** 07:11

Hmm, so what does the card show?

**JC Niala** 07:14

Well, there's an image of three exquisitely dressed Swahili women who were described as the chief wives of Zanzibar. But it's the word in German on the back that uses language to describe the different peoples who are from Zanzibar, in terms that we would not use today. Zanzibar on the Swahili coast has been diverse for a very long time. And so the card describes African, Arab, and Asian peoples.

**Tom Fearon** 07:41

Yes, and why does this diversity matter?

**JC Niala** 07:44

Well, it matters both today, but also historically, Africa is one of the most diverse continents in the world, both in terms of people and languages. And this is often overlooked. Let's stay with Zanzibar for a moment. The lead singer of the band Queen, Freddie Mercury, or Farouk Bulsara, as he was called as a child, was from Zanzibar, and all along the Swahili coast we have examples of many different peoples who interacted with and became part of African communities. When we think about trade, we usually think about the commodities that are being traded. But trade brings people together in different ways.

**Tom Fearon** 08:27

Yes, that's an important point. But it isn't just the interpretation on the card that's wrong, is it?

**JC Niala** 08:32

You're right. For many years, the spectacular ruins, such as the ones at Kilwa Kisiwani that I mentioned at the beginning of this podcast, were assumed to have been built by Arab peoples who travelled to the East African coast. There were European scholars who Kilwa Kisiwani in the mid-1800s. And they couldn't believe that African peoples could have been responsible for building such sophisticated urban centres that had controlled the world's gold trade. These scholars have since been proved wrong with archaeologists, such as Professor Felix Chama, showing that these were indeed African cities that attracted people from different parts of the world.

**Tom Fearon** 09:19

And what sorts of records exist to back up these claims?

**JC Niala** 09:23

Well, one of the most detailed descriptions comes from an African globetrotter of the 14th century, Ibn Battuta, who's travelled would have taken them to 44 different countries, if we were to map it out on a map today, travelled to Spain through the Middle East, India and as far as China, from Tangier, where he was from, which is in present day Morocco. Over 29 years between 1325 to 1354 he kept a record of all the places that he visited, and he declared Kilwa Kisiwani on the Swahili coast, one of the most beautiful towns in the world.

**Tom Fearon** 10:05

Wow, that's quite a journey. How are those travels even possible?

**JC Niala** 10:10

Well, like the ancient trade routes he followed his travels on the Indian Ocean would have been courtesy of the trade winds. From the Swahili coast, The Kaskazi winds, which are northeasterly and blow from December to mid-March, would allow people to travel from the Middle East to the Swahili coast. The Kusi, or southerly winds that go from April to mid-September, helped people to travel from the Swahili coast north. In those times, it didn't pay to miss your boat because you had a number of months to wait before the winds were blowing the right direction. On the East African coast from mid-September to mid-November, the Matalai winds marked the change between the two and it still draws in people from all around the world. They're mainly they travelled by plane rather than by sea now. And they holiday in coastal towns such as Mombasa and Lamu.

**Tom Fearon** 11:07

Thanks, JC. So if you had to summarise what you learned from researching these objects, what would your takeaways be?

**JC Niala** 11:14

Well, the first thing I learned is that it's possible to get a lot out of working with objects, even when they might be difficult or upsetting. Thankfully, we continue to improve how we refer to people who are different from ourselves. And I'm a side note, cigarettes now carry government health warnings rather than colourful cards. Following the roots of the trade winds, I was able to see how African civilizations were involved in a complex global trade, one that saw their goods being sold all over the world, but also brought many different peoples to their shores. Peoples, some of whom became part of the exciting and dynamic cosmopolitan African cities of the mediaeval era.

**Tom Fearon** 11:58

In our next episode, we'll be returning to the Swahili coast to look more closely at what life was like in the cities by exploring an object associated with leadership,

**JC Niala** 12:08

And also by sharing poetry from a Swahili woman called Mwana Kupona, who was publishing her work in the 19th century, when literature was flourishing all around the world, and also on the Swahili coast.

**Tom Fearon** 12:27

We hope you enjoyed this episode about the movement of people and goods along the Swahili coast. As JC shared, from before mediaeval times, Africa is a continent that has been active in trade around the world.

**JC Niala** 12:40

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

**Tom Fearon** 12:45

And Tom Fearon

**JC Niala** 12:47

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Transcribed by [Otter AI](https://otter.ai)