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Material Cultures of Eastern Africa: New Historical Perspectives from the Local to the Global

Wednesday 7- Thursday 8 February 2024

In affiliation with



Image: Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Mitawanda (clog sandals). 19th century. Wood and glass beads. The Cleveland Museum of Art: Educational Purchase Fund, 1929.566.

Conference Summary

In affiliation with the University of Manchester and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, this collaborative conference will explore the diverse methodologies involved in researching eastern Africa's material history and will question how these could be further developed through interdisciplinary and international collaboration. It will bring together junior and senior scholars from archaeology, anthropology, history, art history and museum studies to consider how individuals and communities within eastern Africa have related to each other and to wider Indian Ocean and global networks through the production and consumption of objects, architecture, and ideas. Moreover, Swahili coast studies and studies of inland eastern Africa will be placed in direct conversation, where previously they have been treated quite differently in academic discourse.

The conference also offers an important opportunity to reassess the material relationships that exist between East Africa and former colonising nations. Discussions about restitution, repatriation and methods of 'decolonization' are critical topics in current academic, public, and political discourse. However, not enough attention has yet been paid to eastern Africa in these discussions. This conference will address these issues through interrogation of themes such as the appropriation of cultural property by colonial collectors and museums, and present-day restitution of eastern African cultural heritage. Further still, Eastern African museums established in the colonial era have themselves still not opened their doors fully to local communities regarding restitution debates. We will therefore also discuss topics such as the creation of colonial and national institutions of learning, the production of enduring colonial forms of intellectual and aesthetic knowledge, and issues of public memory and amnesia.

The traditionally insular nature of British, US, and East African research and publishing has long encumbered opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue and exchange. This conference offers a forum for the development of new interdisciplinary and international research networks and will in-turn facilitate new collaborative opportunities. It aims to deconstruct and dismantle the borders between established fields, disciplinary traditions, and geographical locations, to open-up new methodological avenues, and to embrace a non-hierarchical approach towards critical thinking and cultural production. A digital conference blog will offer a space for further reflection by speakers and contributors from the wider research community. We also hope to curate a free online exhibition of objects and images submitted by our speakers and other colleagues. Both platforms will be fully accessible to the public and will be translated into Kiswahili thanks to generous funding from the British Academy. We are also delighted to offer all speakers a financial honorarium thanks to support from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

For further information, please contact:

Ali Bennett (University of Manchester)

Abiti Nelson (Uganda Museum)

Jenny Peruski (Metropolitan Museum of Art / Harvard University)

At: mcoeaconference@gmail.com

Conference Programme

Day One: Wednesday 7 February, 1.00pm–4.30pm (GMT)

Welcome: Abiti Nelson, Jenny Peruski, Ali Bennett, 1.00–1.10pm

PANEL ONE

Material Cultures of Conflict and Post-Conflict, 1.10–2.10pm

Chair: Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp, University College London

Abiti Nelson, Uganda Museums

Title TBC

Zoe Cormack, British Museum

Early Uses of Cartridge Cases in Material Culture from South Sudan

Patrick Abungu, The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

Exploring Eastern Africa's Material History: A Multifaceted Methodological Approach in Studying World Wars History in Kenya

Break: 2.10–2.20pm

PANEL TWO

Gender and Material Culture in Eastern Africa, 2.20–3.20pm

Chair: Stephanie Wynne-Jones, University of York

Eileen Musundi, National Museums of Kenya

The East African Khanga: The Cloth that Reveals

Jenny Peruski, Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Harvard University

Women's Bodies and the Mapping of Urban Space in Eastern Africa

Fred Mutebi, Artist, Uganda

Uganda Bark Cloth Revitalization

Break: 3.20–3.30pm

PANEL THREE

Eastern African Religious Landscapes, 3.30pm–4.30pm

Chair: Derek Peterson, University of Michigan

Anatoli Lwassampijja, Makerere University

Religion and Political Heritage: Remaking the Person of Emmanuel Cardinal Nsubuga, 1966–90

Sana Mirza, Smithsonian Institution

Islamic Manuscripts from Harar, Ethiopia: Toward an Art History

Catherine Ajiambo, Uganda Museums

The Place of Missionary Collections in Museums

Close: 4.30pm

Conference Programme

Day Two: Thursday 8 February, 1.00pm–4.30pm (GMT)

Welcome: Abiti Nelson, Jenny Peruski, Ali Bennett, 1.00–1.10pm

PANEL ONE

Empire, Collecting, and Museums, 1.00–2.00pm

*Chair: JC Niala, History of Science Museum,
University of Oxford*

Sarah Longair, University of Lincoln

*Connections, Collecting and Coercion: The Story of
a Zanzibar Fertility Doll in the Early 20 Century*

**Njabulo Chipangura, Manchester Museum,
University of Manchester**

*Of Curatorial Humility in Undertaking Collaborative
Provenance Research on Kenyan Collections at
Manchester Museum*

Betty Karanja, National Museums of Kenya

Digitizing Cultural Heritage in Post-Colonial Kenya

Break: 2.00–2.10pm

PANEL TWO

Internal East African Mobilities, 2.10–3.10pm

Chair: Prita Meier, New York University

Ali Bennett, University of Manchester

*Diplomatic Gifting & the Eastern African Ivory Trade
in Uganda: Muteesa's Ivory Smoking Pipe*

Noemie Arazi, Africa Museum in Tervuren (Belgium)

Swahili Connectivity in the Upper Congo Basin

Sarah Fee, Royal Ontario Museum

*Fashionable Synergies in Nineteenth-century
Eastern Africa*

Break: 3.10–3.20pm

PANEL THREE

East African Material Culture in the Wider World, 3.20pm–4.20pm

Chair: Nancy Um, Getty Research Institute

**Jeremy Prestholdt, University of California, San
Diego**

*Between Mombasa and Osaka: East African
Consumers, Japanese Industry, and Imperial
Capitalism*

**Jazmin Eyssalenne, University of North Carolina
at Greensboro**

*The Sidi (African-Indian) Sufi Tradition of Gujarat &
Mumbai: Preserving East African Material Culture &
Intangible Cultural Heritage in Western India*

Awet T Araya, British Museum

*Reclaiming History: Tracing Journeys and Narratives
of 8th–9th Century Zanj Coin(s) in European
Museums*

**Closing remarks: Abiti Nelson, Jenny
Peruski, Ali Bennett, 4.20–4.30pm**