CASE STUDY ONE
Horniman Museum & Gardens, London: 
Collections People Stories: Anthropology Reconsidered

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‘Crossing Borders’ event with members of the Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers.
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Project background:

Collections People Stories (CPS - formerly Ethnography Re-envisioned) is a major review of the Horniman’s Anthropology collections, with a focus on raising the profile of the collection and developing cutting edge curatorial, learning and collections practice. The project was successfully granted Arts Council England (ACE) funding in 2012 for three years.

The project focus on widening access to collections was influenced by earlier focus groups with visitors and non-visitors initiated to explore perceptions of the Horniman during a museum-wide rebranding initiative. This revealed that although the museum was valued as a space and an institution, the world-class collections remained relatively unrecognized.
**Aims and outcomes:**

In keeping with the Horniman’s institutional priorities, the project aims to deepen and extend dialogue with academic, local and origin communities, and to build mechanisms for incorporating this into wider museum practice. Widening access to and building knowledge of our collections is central to this. Outcomes agreed with ACE include: physically reviewing 30,000 objects; photographing 12,000 of these; conserving 1000; enhancing the collections online presence; bringing together new and existing academic and community partners to help us set the project agenda; and developing a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for a redisplay at the end of 2014/2015.

These aims are being met. However as the project has progressed the community focus has risen on the agenda due in part to the expertise of project staff, and the relationships established both prior to and during the project. This agenda has been driven across departments, resulting in a series of workshops, public events, and evolving partnerships. Arising from this is the development of a facility to record multiple voices, an emerging reflexive strategy for embedding future origin community work, and a strong online presence through social networking outlets such as tumblr and twitter. Our collections management database is key to our focus on recording different stories to help us understand the multiple and sometimes conflicting narratives that surround our collections. We will also provide access to these stories through exhibitions, visits to our stores, and the dispersal of catalogue information, either online or through personal contacts.

Three case studies will be explored in the following sections, including collaborations with: New Hope International (a London based group of Congolese refugees with an interest in Congolese heritage and 19th/early 20th century European expeditions into the Congo area); a community in the Kalash Valleys of north-west Pakistan; and the Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers in South London (SDCAS).

**Are/were you merely providing access / information or is this a project with mutual aims and outcomes?**

CPS works on the assumption that partnerships and collaborations will be mutually beneficial, built on existing relationships established on an institutional or personal basis, or responding to approaches by interested groups of individuals. Providing access to information has been central to this process, as such photographing as much of the collection as possible evolved as a new priority.
How were the aims/outcomes agreed?

The aims of the wider CPS project agreed with ACE were developed by Senior Management in consultation with internal staff. As noted above, this was in response to earlier focus-group sessions which revealed the low profile of the museum’s collections. The project has enabled different strands of activity to develop and be responsive to existing and emerging relationships with different individuals, groups and communities. The outcomes of these are developed on a case-by-case basis, often in response to the stated interests of the group we are working with. For example:

New Hope International:

Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp was approached by Julie Shacklford and Didier Ibwilakwingi Ekom about a potential gallery tour. After sending them a list of the Congolese collections in storage they decided a collections workshop might be more valuable to the group given their interest in European collectors. The agenda for the day was put together collectively, and they have expressed further interest in collaborating on a digital project about Congolese heritage.

Kalasha Valleys:

Tom Crowley, Assistant Curator, has a long-standing relationship with the community developed during anthropological fieldwork. The Kalasha are a minority group in Pakistan and many are engaged in lobbying for greater representation in national and international politics. This is the collective agenda that has been set for a planned exhibition on Kalasha dress at the Horniman, helping the Kalasha to reach new audiences.

Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers (SDCAS):

SDCAS have been a community partner of the Horniman for 10 years. The Day Centre looks to the Horniman for provision of positive and stimulating activities for adults and families who attend the Centre, whilst for the Horniman the partnership provides interesting opportunities to present the stories, experiences and intangible heritage of people in our local community. When working together, the aims and outcomes are discussed with Centre Workers, then formalised into a Working Together Agreement.
Who are/were the lead personnel on the project?

The CPS project is led by Kirsten Walker – Director of Collections Management and Special Projects; Finbarr Whooley – Director of Curatorial and Public Engagement; Sarah Byrne/Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp – Project Coordinator; and Robert Storrie – Keeper of Anthropology. Individual relationships and projects are however led by the wider project team and developed in partnership with external individuals or groups, principally Fiona Kerlogue – Deputy Keeper of Anthropology; Rachel Harrison – Community Engagement Officer; and Tom Crowley – Assistant Curator of Anthropology.

Are you clear about why you are working with this selected group and with their role as representative of others? Please comment:

An important part of the CPS project has been to develop a wider strategy that articulates the Horniman’s approach to the selection of groups or individuals to work with and wider concerns over representation. The CPS Engagement Strategy outlines a commitment to working with existing partners; the Horniman will, for example, continue to work with SDCAS as long as it is mutually beneficial. The CPS Origin Community Strategy (in draft) highlights the importance of building relationships built on shared enthusiasms and mutual respect. We seek first and foremost to work with groups or individuals who we have existing personal and
institutional relationships with, along with welcoming those who approach the museum seeking new partnerships. We seek to expand the latter through increased transparency and access to information about the collections we look after. The draft CPS Origin Community Strategy is clear that we aim to avoid, wherever possible, presenting narratives that presume to speak on behalf of other people, regardless of where they come from. Rather we seek an open dialogue with individuals and the knowledge, identities, interests, concerns and objectives they bring with them, and we would always accommodate ambiguous or conflicting viewpoints.

**Assessment of authority: why are/were you dealing with this individual or group; how are/were they empowered to speak on behalf of a community? Are/were you satisfied with their ‘credentials’?**

See above.

**Partners – who are/were they? (Please provide website addresses if possible):**

New Hope International: A group of first and second generation Congolese and West African refugees with an interest in the history and heritage of the DRC. They had acquired HLF funding to run a series of workshops in collaboration with UCL and the Royal Geographical Society. The workshop at the Horniman was not part of the HLF funding agreement.

Individuals part of the Kalash Community in north-west Pakistan.

SDCAS: [http://www.sdcas.org.uk/](http://www.sdcas.org.uk/)

**Is/was it a museum-to-museum/ cultural centre project?**

N/A

**What are/were the budgets and other resources? (eg. grant awards, dedicated staff, sponsorship):**

As mentioned above, CPS is an ACE funded initiative, running over three years. For community initiatives, this has provided an Engagement Officer and money for materials, travel and subsistence, as well as a Project Coordinator, with public communication of the project written into the job specification. It has also funded a Digital Assistant to build the online presence of the project through social networking platforms. In addition, wider curatorial and collections project staff have been personally committed to community engagement, driving three collections workshops, a planned exhibition and providing digital content for tumblr and twitter. The project also relies on commitments from our partners. For example, from SDCAS we rely on staff time to support clients to participate and to share the information necessary for the museum to work effectively in the Day Centre setting. New Hope International had their own sources of funding to cover travel to and from the museum and stores and the project remained reliant on the individual interests of
the group members. The Kalasha project relies on individuals who have offered their time to discuss their concerns and objectives with the curator.

**What are/were the timescales?**
The CPS project will run for three years, from 2012-2015.

**Ethical considerations – describe what these involved in relation to the project and how they were agreed/adhered to?**

At a project-wide level, we seek to adhere to the following:

- Interpreting our collections from multiple perspectives and acknowledging the ambiguities and contradictions that can arise when individuals from different backgrounds (social, cultural, political) draw meaning from the same object.

- Building relationships based on mutual interest and respect, and providing an environment where people feel confident and able to voice their opinions and raise debates.

- Being in a position to respond to contestations and debates through flexible practice.

- Being reflexive and open about what we do, why we do it and who it benefits.

- Being transparent about the content of our collections and the means by which they were acquired.

This list emerged through consideration of existing Horniman-wide procedures and internal discussion. Ethical considerations are also assessed on a case-by-case basis in response to the concerns raised by the individuals and groups we work with.

**Please also describe any compromises, surprises and how the project may have been transformed through the engagement:**

Compromises and surprises are central to any relationship since individuals, groups and institutions bring with them their own expectations and agendas. For many, working with the Horniman is not a priority. It has been important to remain flexible and responsive to change where possible.

For example, working with SDCAS can be challenging as the Centre is a drop-in so you cannot be guaranteed the same people attend a workshop or that they choose to engage with an activity – there may be other things that take priority such as an appointment with the health visitor, or a meeting with an immigration lawyer. Workshops at the Day Centre therefore have to be suitable for people to engage for short periods. This can often mean it is a challenge to produce a final piece.
What things would you consider if embarking on a similar project again?

The CPS project is still underway, with over half of its running time remaining. As such is it too early to make a full assessment of its potential successes and shortcomings. It will be fully evaluated at a later stage.

What things would you avoid?
See above.

References to publications relating to project (online/in print):

CPS webpage: http://www.horniman.ac.uk/about/collections-people-stories
CPS Blog posts: http://www.horniman.ac.uk/get_involved/blog/category/collections-people-stories
CPS Tumblr: http://in-the-horniman.tumblr.com/
CPS Community Engagement Strategy:
http://www.horniman.ac.uk/media/_file/Collections_People_Stories_Community_Engagement_strategy.pdf