Radical Museums Podcast - Nasir Adam

Simon Stephens: Hi, I'm Simon Stephens, the head of publications and events at the Museums Association, and I'm presenting the second episode of our radical museums podcast. At the MA we've been exploring what radical practice and activism means for museums for a number of years now. We're campaigning values led organisation, and our current campaigns include decolonisation, anti-racism, climate, justice, and well being. We know that museums can make a real positive difference to people's lives. And throughout this podcast series, we're talking to museum activists and those that are striving for and driving change today. I'm delighted to say that our guest for this episode is Nasir Adam. Let's go and meet him. Welcome to the Radical Museums Podcast.

Simon Stephens: I'm here at the beautiful St Fagans Museum of National History. We are on the edge of Cardiff, and I'm delighted to be joined by the Nasir Adam, who is the black history curator at Museum Wales. It's lovely to see you. Thanks so much for taking the time to join me. Firstly, do you prefer this Nasir or Naz.

Nasir Adam: You can call me Naz.

Simon Stephens: We've got this lovely object in front of us. Would you mind describing it.

Nasir Adam: It was a community that organised the Somali heritage event, which first took place in 2019, so pre-Covid. And one of the community members have contributed this to our collection, really representing the Somali community in its essence. Every Somali community member will know what Fujian is. In Somali terminology, it's called a Fujian. Basically, it represents the bride in in a wedding, it's used in our cultural weddings. This was actually used by the lady's grandmother, in

Somaliland. And it basically, if you look at the curvature, it represents the bride. But also it comes with, we haven't got the cloth at the moment, but it comes with a veil. If you opened it slightly, you've got a vessel underneath. So, in that vessel, you will have like dried meat, honey, milk, which all is to do with the purity of that their marriage and the significance of that marriage. Milk is for purity, honey is for, hopefully, a well-lived marriage, a successful marriage, and meat, because the Somalis are nomadic communities and their backgrounds are nomadic, meat is quite precious in the sense that it represents wealth, in terms of your livestock and other things. So, they put dried meat in there as well for prosperity for that marriage. But it's a beautiful vessel made with them pearls, and it's a vessel within the vessel, if that makes sense. But it's called the Fujian, which is primarily celebrated on the third day of the wedding and is normally a gift from the bride's family to the groom's family. And then they would open up and the men would have a separate one. So the more lavish the wedding is, the more vessels there wouild. So sometimes you could have over 16 or 17 vessels or made for that community. But nowadays, I think there's extra vessels where they put gold and other things like that for the bride.

Simon Stephens: It's really amazing. It's quite a large object, isn't it? I guess it's about, what do you think, about a metre high.

Nasir Adam: A metre high, yes. And it's made with cow or camel leather that goes around it.

Simon Stephens: There's lots of shells, aren't there? Are they very significant – the use of shells?

Nasir Adam: It is. The shells, again, it’s for purity. Uou will always see the white and the red, the of red meaning bloodline, and the white meaning purity.

Simon Stephens: Is this object now part of the collection here?

Nasir Adam: Yeah, it is part of our collections. And this is one of the things that we really want to collect this from communities that have been here in Wales for, you know, hundreds of years, but we don't have any anything in terms of objects or that that really resonates with that community or represents that community. So, from 2019, we started with the Somali heritage, which was new in itself, because it was all coordinated and designed by the community and the community had the ownership of St Fagans, this beautiful space that we are in. We just gave them ownership for that whole day and it was absolutely amazing. I know there were couple of people thinking, oh, should we do this and do that? But we all kind of stepped back then and actually allowed, and it actually proved the point that if we allow communities to take ownership of beautiful spaces, and these spaces are for communities. I remember one of the speakers saying that without people, museums are nothing really, so the backbone for any museums is the communities that exist around the museum. So, it was a really successful event. And I think we had a multiple community groups, so we had the young, who did poetry, and we had the elders, and had a group that is often forgotten within our Somali community, which is our women, because they are our backbone for all our communities. You know, we've had books from the seamen, the merchant sailors, but nothing about their wives. So, we've actually commissioned a film documentary looking at the wives of merchant sailors, and their contribution towards the development of Wales, economically and culturally, and in terms of family as well.

Simon Stephens: Wow, that's really fascinating. Really interesting to hear. So, can you describe a bit about your role here as a curator of black history here?

Nasir Adam: Sure. I mean, I see my role as a bridge. What I would love to do is really engage with communities that would never have set foot in our national museums. Time and time again, we're hearing from communities loud and clear that they can't really see themselves, a mirror image of themselves, within the national museums. Yes, they are beautiful pictures, other histories, which is quite fascinating and interesting. But they said, where's our contribution? Where are we in this whole makeup. So, one of the things that we've decided to do was just kind of started from scratch, really, and start collecting from the communities so they could really see how museums work as well. And by, you know, engaging and empowering and embedding ourselves within these communities, I think it's really quite vital that we give them that space. But it's the recognition and the contributions and the presence of that community that is the most important, I think. So, coming back to my role, I see my role as an enhancer. So, you enhance that community and give them the opportunities. But one of the things that I've always said from the beginning is that just because I've got the title as a black history curator, it doesn't mean that everything to do with black history, or communities should lie with me – it should be a whole department or that or the national museum needs to aspire to that. So, every curator should have the responsibility to start collecting, and evidencing voices from communities that would never have the opportunities of coming into our museums, and diversifying ourselves. So, I see myself as a tiny jigsaw. But I think if the other pieces of the jigsaw are not all together, and when all performing from the same kind of vision and strategy, then it's going to become another, unfortunately, the community might see this as another tick-box exercise of a national organisation trying to engage with communities. But I think we're quite lucky in the sense in Wales that we've got the support from, not only from the national government, the Welsh

Government, but also from other civil societies such as the Arts Council of Wales, I think everyone in understands that, yes, and the ways that we've been doing it, you know, in terms of museums and art, it's just been a curator who is in their room, or he or she is in their room, and they decided what the collections was. But actually there's a whole manifestation of change going through at the moment with our national museums, as well as the national government of Wales and other institutions, all kind of aligning themselves to the Welsh Government anti-racism 2030 vision. And it's a privilege to have that, where everyone actually comes together with the same aim, but not forgetting the communities that who are the main drivers in that. So, the other partnership is the communities in itself. But we're quite fortunate, I'm quite lucky that I've joined at the right time and at the right moment, with everything that was happening. But yeah, I'm quite fortunate. And also, I see myself both as an insider and outsider within the museum itself. Because I've never worked in museology, I've never worked in these kinds of beautiful institutions, I've always been a community activist, but with a social science background. And even for me, I remember the first day I started, just looking around thinking, where am in this beautiful space? I couldn't see anything that resonated with me, or my community or where I came from, or my heritage. So, it's nice to really see that there was a huge gap that we were missing in terms of our communities. So, I'm quite privileged that I've got that environment around us where everyone wants to see that change and everyone's kind of singing from the same hymn sheet.

Simon Stephens: Wveryone's putting it together, that makes sense that sounds that sounds really, really important. It's interesting you're talking about coming as an outsider as well. Obviously in your

job title is curator, how do you sort of see the role as curator did you have certain expectations before you joined about what a curator is and should be?

Nasir Adam: I see as quite as quite lucky in a sense that I wasn't a curator before because having spoken to majority of my colleagues, you know, who've been in the museum for that decades, there were a certain way of performing of becoming a curator and it was more I think singular, you know, you were the both the curator, the designer, the collector, and you decided on what collections were going to go into the exhibitions. But coming into it as an activist, coming in here, you wanted to do things differently. Totally. I totally understood that my colleagues, in terms of changing the culture it takes quite a long time. And it was unfair for me to really say, right, okay, you've got to work on my speed, because it takes time to change, and I appreciate that. And I think, for me, what is the word I'm looking for. I'm looking for an open book without really, there wasn't anything constructed. For me, it was just more of a learning curve, saying that, how do we change, how do we enhance more community involvement and diversify engagement. So, I was quite lucky that I could use my tools that I've learned from outside in terms of community organisation and enabling community and speaking to different communities. That skill has really played a role in the national museum. And I think it was David Anderson [former director of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales], who said, you know, we've got to be both an activist and a curator at the same time, you know, speaking up for communities that that never had any voice, but also ensuring that these communities lead the way and the become initially the curator, and we become the support for the communities. So, I ran with that, and basically never looked back. And I really have, because it's interesting details of the Somali community organising the heritage event, their own heritage event. That was clearly shown

of how proud they were of showcasing that, but also how they engage with other community members who didn't know anything about Somali community. So, they become the force for engaging with other community members and answering things from their own communities. Because at the end, they're the specialised curators, not ourselves. Yeah, we're there to probably, you know, provide a platform for these communities, but it should be the communities that are leading it. And I think, in terms of our strategy for Amgueddfa Cymru, I think that's the leading way where we're looking at decolonisation by allowing the communities to lead on decolonisation because, you know, what does decolonisation mean – it's very subjective to who you look at. And I think because it's been written academically a lot about decolonisation, how does that filter down to communities? And, yeah, it's allowing communities to take ownership of that word in itself.

Simon Stephens: It's interesting to think about our what does decolonisation actually mean for communities. And you're right, it's really important and I noticed on your I noticed on your Twitter handle, you call yourself a community enabler? I guess that's about enabling the community to take an active part in what they do. Yeah, that's really interesting. And do you think the work you're doing, do you get a sense already that the community's views, the communities you're dealing, their views of what the national museums is, is changing?

Nasir Adam: I think absolutely. In terms of, you know, its consistency. And, for example, look at Bhutan, or Latin square, it's one of the most multicultural spaces in Cardiff, and in Wales. A lot of these communities, if you look at their historical relationships with external organisations, a lot of these communities will say to you, well, we always get people being parachuted into our communities, without really being involved in the decision and feedback of how that information or

project is going to impact on our communities, but also obviously, how it is going to enhance. We kind of deconstructed everything, rather than just going in there saying that we know everything, it's actually saying to the communities, you are researchers, and actually, financially, you know, giving commitments to these communities as a credible researchers and actually acknowledging that, that it's not, it's not only academics that are the general researchers, it's also the communities who know, you know, everything about themselves. So, I think it's about acknowledging and accrediting communities, giving them ownership of research, But at the same time, giving them the opportunities to engage with within museums and taking ownership of their museums, in every sense of centre that word.

Simon Stephens: That's really interesting. And you have value in communities and actually, you know, putting your money where your mouth is actually, you know, paying for them for their time, if that's if that's appropriate, and things like that. It's really important, isn't it and giving them the power? So, what I'm really keen to hear what you think sort of the key things that museums need to consider when working with communities and kind of, you know, in ethical and appropriate ways. Is there a way a sort of way of summing up what these key things are that museums need to consider when they're working with the community.

Nasir Adam: I think you've got to be quite honest and truthful. You know, it's not being afraid to say I actually don't know, you know, or we haven't made that connection. So, communities could see that that honesty and they feel that, okay, they're on the same platform as you, or they might even support you with getting that, but also interested in terms of accrediting and valuing the communities. So, there's value in their research, monetizing their volunteering. And so, yes, you

know, there are organisations that exist purely on getting volunteers, but as the national museum it is about how do we show communities that we value their research, their work, and you have to pay volunteers from our communities. That's one of one of the ways that we look at. And even if we're commissioning reports – for example, we commissioned through Welsh government funding, a wide engagement in collaboration with the national Art Council of Wales, where we commissioned the community groups to actually do the research, and for them to be as honest as possible, and we were there to listen to them, you know, whether, you know, it was hard hearing for us, it wasn't easy to swallow, but is hearing the truth from the communities as to why they felt that, you know, these spaces weren't as inclusive as they wish. But if you feel quite honest, and you're quite truthful with communities, communities see that. I mean, it's a simple process, but it's about really acknowledging and appreciating the hard work that communities have always done. And I don't think communities have been ever given these platforms. And it's about allowing them to stay with the whole duration, rather than having, you know, short-term projects where you just fund communities and that's it then, and then you move on to the next communities. There's got to be longevity, there's got to be that longevity of relationships. And this is why we say rather than engagement, it is about embedding ourselves our communities, so communities see us, and we will see our communities. So, I think yeah, the three key areas for me is longevity, value, and appreciation and the way that you acknowledge that within communities.

Simon Stephens: Absolutely. No, that's fascinating. And just for a bit of context for the listeners, can you just tell us a bit more about the Somali community in in Cardiff?

Nasir Adam: Yeah, sure. I mean, the Somali community is one of the oldest communities for I mean, for me, I'm a third generation, I call myself a Welsh Somali. And this is one thing that also Somalis here in Wales are really proud of both their dual heritage, which is Welsh and and Somali, because it's been played into us by our fathers and grandfathers. But the Somalis have been here since the 18th century, they've contributed to both the infrastructure, the economics, and also the cultural and food, if you like, the music as well, in terms of art. They can contributed so much, but the Somali communities are very low key community, they don't like to really shout out terms of their achievements. But I think the younger generations are becoming more activist and they're saying actually, we're here, this is what, our fathers and grandfathers and our grandparents and grandma grandmothers have contributed to the society. You know, we weren't only here from the 1980s, which is sometimes perceived in the media. But then we've been here since there, you know, for over 300 years, and we've had really, really quite milestones as well. I mean, the last person to be hanged was a Somali here in Wales. And then it's stories like that, that needs to be what factual things that needs to be taught to our younger generations. You know, when we look at black history, what is Black History? Because it is different from different communities. And what a lot of Somali young people, because they see themselves as this intersectionality of different identities, so being Somali being Muslim being, t's about reinforcing who they are, and actually retelling the achievements that was made by their parents. But the Somali community has been here for hundreds of years, like the Yemeni community, and they were all seafarers, they're all merchant sailors, navy, and they took part in the First World War Second World War. Yeah, we really need to recognise that history. Because even for me, I'm quite I was quite fortunate that I had a time with both my grandparents and the

other merchant sailors, who in the cafes woulid tell you stories of me going out in sea but a lot of our fourth and fifth generations haven't got that knowledge and that valuable. yeah, knowledge of how their grandparents have achieved. But also, you know, we have some amazing leaderships which unfortunately is not being celebrated as well in Wales. The first ever I think you second to Kofi Anan, he was from Barry Docks. He was he was one of them who climbed up, you know, at the United Nations and was second to Kofi Annan. Yeah, we, um, we have an Olympic medallist and this really needs to be taught to our younger generations and future generations?

Simon Stephens: It sounds a really rich and varied history and it's interesting this idea of well, changing through the generations as well and multiple identities is really interesting as well. People, you know, often tend to see people as just one thing when none of us are they're all we're all we're all different identities. It's very fascinating. I'd love to hear a bit briefly about what you talked about these heritage days – what happens on these on these heritage days that you've run?

Nasir Adam: Well, we've had, unfortunately 2000 to 2019, we had the pandemic and lockdown. So we had to evolve, where communities in order to keep that, again, that longevity of different events could going. So, we went on to digital, where we had a digital platform. The communities again, they've organised exactly the same thing, but this time they've actually reached out to international partners. So the Somaliland National Museum, Dr Jama came up came on board, and started to really look at the knowledge between the diaspora communities here in Wales, and also the communities that exist in Somaliland, in terms of arts and heritage and culture. And actually getting young people from Somaliland to engage with young people here and to look at, you know, talk about their identities and what makes them, you know, in terms of their identities. Basically the

heritage events are organises by and for the Somali community, and we're hoping we could use the same template for other communities as well. So, they could take ownership of their own culture and showcase it and just seeing the museum come alive and nd then you see visitors coming in and joining in in terms of the workshops, the dance, even the clothes and trying all the different clothings – how beautiful is that in terms of the space rather than just having, you know, these frames in an exhibition areas, but actually, you will see the museum coming alive in itself. And that's the only way that I could describe it. But how proud people are as well from communities and, and seeing the same communities coming in, again, to the national museum. So that would be another way that they feel actually that they're part of this institution. And they take ownership of that. We just recently had, after three years of online events, we just had on the 26th of November, one of our biggest events. What is poignant as well was that there was a young poet, who said, if you would not have allowed us into the national museums we would have kicked the doors down. And I was quite fascinated in the sense that they say, you know, it's not only about giving us the opportunities of taking part in these kinds of events, it's about the longevity, we should have our own space for our own heritage exhibitions. So, they're really looking forward in how they could implement themselves within these their national museums, which was great to see. But we wouldn't have that discussion had the communities not organise these cultural events, and actually moving forward of how do we implement the in terms of our strategies for the next 10 years, in giving spaces to communities and flexible spaces, to communities, so we can put exhibitions on when and if things happen.

Simon Stephens: Yeah, that's really interesting. And you mentioned at the start of your talk, you talked a bit about sort of activism, when we when we first started talking do you do to sort of see yourself as a kind of activist and doing radical museum work?

Nasir Adam: Absolutely. And I think, I think we all are, to a certain extent that activists because we all believe in something that is precious to us. And I think it's what makes me drive every morning, it's getting up and ensuring that that you're given, you know, you're always reflecting that you're giving communitie, the opportunities and the platform. And just carrying that work along, but also not being afraid of speaking truth to power as well. I think that's really essential. If you don't believe in it in a course then there is not point you being here. Again, another tick-box exercise. But it's really making a great difference within national museums whether you know, you feel actually, this might not be the right time, but it's just having that courage. I think courage actually.

Simon Stephens: Yeah, it's important to have the courage to have those difficult conversations, isn't it? It's not always easy, but if you do it in the right in the right spirit.

Nasir Adam: You see the change, and thank God in Wales we've seen that change and it took a lot of brief to raise that both on a governmental level but on a national level as well in terms of our national museum. But it's really crucial that you get the buy-in from the top because I think without the leadership in the in the museums, if they really generally don't believe in, then we're gonna have what issues. But if we could get the buy in from both the board of directors and the leadership within the national museum its changes things.

Simon Stephens: Yeah, it's absolutely crucial. Well, it's been really fascinating. So, I'm just gonna end on a question about sort of inspiration. So, are there any sort of individuals who inspire you in

your work either in the museum sector or not museum sector in the community or family? Who's your inspiration?

Nasir Adam: I think it's definitely my grandfather. He always taught us about sticking up for yourself and sticking up for your communities. I mean, I grew up, I was quite privileged in that I was born in a Butetown, where I think everyone is an activist, because we've always been fighting, it is in our spirit to fight. The call it Tiger Bay where the tigers in those areas. But you know, I was fortunate to have Betty Campbell as my teacher, and a youth worker who was an activist.

Simon Stephens: Who was Betty Campbell?

Nasir Adam: Oh, Betty Campbell was the first ever black headteacher in a Welsh school. And she's got an actual statue, it is just outside the BBC and Inland Revenue. As you come through the train station, look out for Beverly Campbell. And there was Neil Sinclair, a historian, and he really reinforced the whole idea that we need to we need to know who we are, and we need to look back and, and speak to our elders. So, I was quite fortunate that I grew up in an era where activism was the norm. You know, we were fighting against injustice in terms of housing, in terms of education, and I remember going to the library trying to decolonise the library, but we didn't really understand what decolonisation mean, but we just wanted to see books by black authors to be readily available for communities who are from the black communities. And even so I remember when that didn't happen, Betty Campbell didn't stop there. She wanted to show us that, you know, you shouldn't just give up. So, what she'd done is that then she opened up a whole library for Black History at the Butetown history and educational training centre. So, I was quite fortunate that I grew up with that

whole kind of environment and the Cardiff Three, marching with them and yeah, it's it just blossomed from there.

Simon Stephens: Yeah, it sounds like very ingrained in your growing up. That's brilliant Nast. That's been such a fascinating conversation – we've got a beautiful object, had beautiful weather and, and a beautiful of a conversation, I think. So, thanks very much.

You ever been listening to the Museums Association's Radical Museums podcast? This episode was presented by me, Simon Stephens. We'd love to hear your feedback and thoughts about what you've heard, and what museum activism means to you. You can find out all about us and our campaigns through our website, which can be found at www museumsassociation.org Thanks for listening.