# Community Action Researcher Sherry Davis (Special Episode)

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

kenya, community, people, history, museum, conservation, archaeology, coast, honour, unesco world heritage, research, hinterland, realise, work, national museums, statues, african, began, programme, national museum

## SPEAKERS

Jimbi Katana, JC Niala, Sherry Davis, Tom Fearon

**JC Niala** 00:16

Hello, and welcome to our very first special 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. Together with objects and histories, we open a different window into African worlds.

**Tom Fearon** 00:46

We will show how these objects continue to be used on the continent and in the diaspora in various ways. The narratives we share based on research carried out by the Horniman’s curators and community researchers. Each month we focus on a different theme. 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're interested in African history, material culture, and museum collections, then this is the podcast for you.

**JC Niala** 01:20

We are your hosts JC Niala,

**Tom Fearon** 01:23

and Tom Fearon. In this special episode, we are joined by one of our community researchers, Sherry Davis, who has been exploring the erasure of black African contributions to archaeology. Her grandfather was one of the first Africans to excavate ancient monuments along the East African coast. And her project focuses on highlighting the unseen and unsung African archaeologists who are absent from history. Welcome, Sherry.

**Sherry Davis** 01:52

Thank you, Tom. For this episode, I interviewed Jimbi Katana who became an archaeologist after his father was killed at Gede Ruins in 1978. In those tragic circumstances, Jimmy was offered his father's position at national museums of Kenya, and rose up the ranks to become the head of coastal sites. He retired from national museums of Kenya in 2015, but continues to work as a heritage consultant, which includes spearheading a campaign to repatriate stolen spiritual artefacts called the Vigango and return them back to their rightful home with the Mijikenda community who live on the coast of Kenya.

**JC Niala** 02:34

This is Afro Historyscapes. always something new, always has been, always on the move.

**Sherry Davis** 02:47

Uncle Jimi, thank you so much for joining me today. It's such an honour to speak with you. Tell us about your journey into archaeology and conservation as a career. What inspired you to follow this path?

**Jimbi Katana** 03:02

I started my, my interest basically, the way I joined the museum is actually when my dad was passed on in 1978, when he was bitten by a snake at Gede National Monument. The museum, thought that one of his sons can be given an opportunity to work for the National museums of Kenya. And that was a time when we had Dr. Thomas H. Wilson who was the coast archaeologist based in Lamu. So I was sent to Lamu to work with Dr. Thomas H. Wilson who was doing some archaeological excavations in Takwa, that is in Lamu. And that is when I started my field surveys with him in 1978. And then, he left around 1982. Back to the US, [inaudible] got myself interested in archaeology. And then, in 19, in 1983, I was nominated by the director, the director at that time was Dr. Richard Leakey. And I went to ICOM in Italy to study conservation of built heritage. And under is a time when I came back, and I'm involved in archaeology and conservation, because most of the Swahili settlements along the Kenyan coast, are built heritage basically, so it is conservation and archaeological work which goes hand in hand. So that was a time now I started working with Dr. George Abungu who was actually head of coastal archaeology at that time. So we work together doing surveys along the Kenyan coast, important ecology and conservation of these historical sites along the Kenyan coast. That is how I got myself involved in archaeology and conservation, but then later on, I went to University of Birmingham, in Britain, there was an institute in Coalbrokdale which is called Ironbridge Institute where I studied heritage, conservation and management for one year. And then I got myself very much involved now in conservation issues for the built heritage along the Kenyan coast.

**Sherry Davis** 05:20

That's wonderful, you've had such a long and illustrious career. So what is it about the coast of Kenya that makes it so special?

**Jimbi Katana** 05:30

The coast of Kenya is very special because of the different layers of history. Because coast has been in contact with the outside world for a long time. Right from the--- I mean, the tangible information that we have is actually when the settlements were established. And they go back to about the seventh century. So the Kenyan coast has been in contact with the outside world for a very, very long time, I think, during the time of the first or second millennium. So there is that record and because of these layers of history, people coming in, trading with the hinterland, because the coastal region was more-or-less acting as midway between the outside world and the hinterland. So it became known from that time. And the establishment of all the Swahili city states, which were independent from one another, and we have more than 200 city states along the Kenyan coast. So the layers of history along the Kenyan coast are very significant because relationship with the outside world, and also the hinterland, as well.

**Sherry Davis**

That’s amazing to find out, there were so many city states at the time, over 200.

**Jimbi Katana**

Yeah, more than 200 of them, most of them have been abandoned actually. The only five that are remaining, there is Pate, Lamu, Witu, Malindi and Mombasa, those are the ones which have continuous occupation from earliest period all the way to the present, but all the others, like the one at Gede for example, which was abandoned around the 17th century, most of them were abandoned around that time.

**Sherry Davis** 07:03

So your father worked at Gede Ruins and that is the first ancient monument to be excavated in East Africa. What legacy did your dad leave you? And what legacy do you wish to leave for future generations?

**Jimbi Katana** 07:18

Well, I think because my father was, was an attendant at Gede Ruins, and he was used to work with James Kirkman doing archaeological excavations at Gede, I think the legacy that my father left behind was actually his hard work, which made me get my get my name to the National Museums of Kenya. Because my father's--- my dad, died when he was working at Gede when he was bitten by a snake. The reason why perhaps I was given the opportunity to work with the museum was that my father did for National Museums of Kenya at that time.

**Sherry Davis** 07:54

It’s so heartwarming to learn that your dad's work was expanded through you and all the amazing things that you've done over the years, I'm sure he’d be really proud of you

**Jimbi Katana** 08:04

Perhaps he could have done more, because he died when he was still… he was about 40, around 40s. That is the time when he passed on 40 or 50 years old. So he could have done more, because he worked at Gede and then it will moved to Fort Jesus and was brought back again to Gede. And that is where now he got bitten by a snake.

**Sherry Davis**   
So what legacy do you wish to leave for future generations?

**Jimbi Katana**

Actually some that I’ve done and there’s so many things that I’m still working on at moment to do with the National Museums of Kenya. And also my firstborn, who is an architect, was also given the opportunity with the museum to work in Lamu, because Lamu is a world heritage site, and the conservation program they have been working on. And now he actually lives in Lamu. So there is continuity with my family working with the National Museums of Kenya because I will now retire. My son is with the museum. Now he's actually been seconded to the county government of Lamu, he is a chief officer there. They're dealing with planning and infrastructure development. So we are still actually there, a family. My father’s sons are still at the museum the museum and dealing with conservation issues.

**Sherry Davis** 09:20

That’s so brilliant to hear, that’s three generations that worked with National Museums of Kenya.

**Jimbi Katana**

My father, me myself, and now my son.

**Sherry Davis**

Brilliant. So you’re passing on to your children. That's wonderful.

**Jimbi Katana**

Yeah, yeah. So there’s that kind of opportunity.

**Sherry Davis**

So what are the highlights of your career? And why do they hold particular significance for you?

**Jimbi Katana** 09:43

Well some of them that I can mention are actually the surveys that we carried out with Dr. Thomas Wilson along the Kenyan coast. They actually gave me the knowledge of knowing what we have along the Kenyan coast. Their conditions the significance of these settlements. And also other heritage sites along the Kenyan coast. And also with George Abungu whereby we did a lot of work along the Kenyan coast as well, which is now, people are referring to some of those works that we did. And the highlight is actually when I was involved in planning Lamu for purposes of gazetting Lamu Old Town as a conservation area, and eventually its nomination to UNESCO World Heritage. I was very much involved in the planning of Lamu. And that is something that they’re referring to, the work that we did. The other one is the preparation of nomination of Fort Jesus to be to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site as well. And I've done a lot of restoration works in Malindi. I opened up Malindi Museum, I also did a lot of work in Rabai where I developed a narrative for the exhibition in Rabai. We also did a lot of restoration work in Shimoni, an old colonial building the first Colonial Office in Kenya, which was utterly abandoned. It was in a ruin we restored it back to its original form, and now we have put a slavery in that building, in Shimoni, So I was involved in a number of research activities along the Kenyan coast.

**Sherry Davis** 11:36

I've been to that building into Shimoni. I think you sent me there when I came to Kenya.

**Jimbi Katana**

Yeah that’s it. You went to Shimoni, when I left you in Fort Jesus, yes.

**Jimbi Katana**

And that building was actually in ruin

**Sherry Davis**

Ok. And you helped to restore it?

**Jimbi Katana**

Yeah, I did the research and works and also developing the narrative for the exhibition in Shimoni.

**Sherry Davis**

Amazing! So let's talk about the Vigango memorial statues because I know that you've been massively involved in spearheading the return of those statues to the Mijikenda community in Kenya.

**Jimbi Katana** 11:50

Yes with the Vigango’s, I got myself involved when I was actually the head of coastal sites and monuments. And because of that position, and knowing that, Monica Ravi and [inudible] plus John [inaudible] who did some work in the Vignangos had documented two Vigangos in Kaloleni area, which eventually they were actually stolen. So, fortunately, Monica and Linda participated in, in a workshop in the US, and one of the presenters presented slides of a Vigango, which was similar to what they had documented in Kaloleni. So they communicated with me because we knew one another, that needs to go to xxxx, a village called xxxx, to see if those Vignango that are documented are still there of if they are the one they have seen in the US. So when there we realised, I found that the Vigangos has been stolen. So we communicated with Monica and Linda about it. And then they wanted me to write to these universities that is Illinois State Museum and Hampton, for then to be able to repatriate these Vigangos back to Kenya. So eventually Illinois responded positively. And they wanted to ship those Vigango, the ones they had in Illinois, back to Kenya. But then our minister then at that time who was Masha Kombo said that we had to go to the US, so that we can get these Vingangos ourselves and bring them back to Kenya so that we can be able to campaign more Vigangos to be returned. And we went to the US with Masha Kombo who was our minister, Dr.Farah who was Director General at that time, and Dr. Dr. Mzalendo Kibunjia who is currently the Director of the National Museums of Kenya. So we went to the US, in Illinois, and we were even the first Vigango which we brought back to Kenya. And eventually Hampton also realise that this is significant because of the sensitivity of these spiritual artefacts, they also eventually sent the Vigango to Kenya. So we took them back to the family at chelani whereby we then [inaudible] and they were re-erected again, in a structure that provided security for these Vigangos. So that is how I got myself involved into this Vigango issues. And actually now getting more Vigangos coming back to Kenya, because people have realised that these Vigangos are significant in Mijikenda community. And not just an ordinary artefact they are very sensitive spiritual artefacts but currently getting Vigangos being brought back to Kenya.

Last year, or last year but one, we got Vigangos from Denver Museum of Natural History. And we are doing follow ups in with other museums to get other museums in the US to get Vigangos back to Kenya. So this is how I got myself involved in this Vigango issue.

**Sherry Davis**That’s so brilliant. And you you'd have helped to return over 100 Vigango statues

**Jimbi Katana**

There are 21 Vigangos in Fort Jesus, which are in our conservation laboratory that waiting to be to brought to Kilifi county where these communities who own these Vigangos are coming from. So I am sure soon these Vigangos will go back to Kilifi and they hand over to these communities.

**Sherry Davis** 15:30

it's been. So what's, what's the Mijikenda community’s response to receiving the statues.

**Jimbi Katana** 15:37

I think they're very happy toget these vigangos back, but because when we were receiving them in fort Jesus Museum, we also went with the elders from Kauma community, and also from Giriama community for the issue of these Vigangos and in fact they are looking forward to receiving them and find a centre whereby they can finally be and to find a common area for the Vigango that have been repatriated back to Kenya to be accommodated there. And we are thinking that for the issue this may be the best place to have them because it is very central, all the communities around Kilifi. So having a place in Kilifi to have them would be wonderful idea. And I think everybody is working towards that objective.

**Sherry Davis** 16:23

it's wonderful that you've been a part of something that's important is needed in the community. And I'm excited to see what happens in the future and how many more you're able to get back, because it seems as if the responses come mostly from the US

**Jimbi Katana** 16:41

Yah, the US is responding very positively. And also, I think Europe is also following up some of these issues, because recently, we had some discussions with one of the journalists in Germany, and I think people are taking it up and there is so much, which is actually outside Kenya, outside Africa, which is actually in Europe and in the US, and I think that actually some of these artefacts which are very sensitive will pass and people will eventually deaccession them and bring them back to Kenya.

**Sherry Davis** 17:14

They repatriation has been such a hot topic of discussion within the Diaspora community. And there have been a lot of barriers when it comes to being able to repatriate these items back from institutions. So for you, what were the barriers to that began to being repatriated, and how did you navigate them?

**Jimbi Katana** 17:37

The whole process, because you need to identify where which they, where they are. But also one of the challenges that we are facing is that we do not know exactly where they come from. We know that they're coming from the Mijikenda, from the Giriama and Kauma communities, most of them are coming from Girimama and Kauma but the two communities are the ones who carve these vigangos. But then the problem is that we do not know exactly which family they come from. Because they don't have any markers – that is one of the biggest challenges. And that the reason why we have to look for a central place and have all the repatriated vigango there closer to these communities. So the elders there can be able to visit some of these Vigangos these are embodiments of elders who are actually in the local society, so the members of the Gohu can actually be able to assist in the curation of these sensitive spiritual artefacts.

**Sherry Davis** 18:39

I think to offer some context, could you explain what the Vigango memorials that these are, and also who the Mijikenda community are?

**Jimbi Katana** 18:49

Vigango is a wooden memorial statue that was commissioned to embody an ancestral spirit or a Mijikenda elder who was initiated into the Gohu society. Gohu society is actually a secret society. And when you are initiated into this society, you can become consulted on matters of spiritual matters, issues of if there's in adversity, for example, affecting a certain family, then these are the people who are consulted. They can speak with a spirit on behalf of all the people so that if there are any problems any adversity then they can be able to be taken care of. So, these are actually traditional priests so to speak. So when you are initiated into that society when you die, then they erect a Vigango for you. So Vigango is erected for someone who has been initiated into the society to become a traditional priest.

**Sherry Davis** 19:48

Also could you let our listeners know who are the Mijikenda community.

**Jimbi Katana** 19:53

These are the nine tribes because we have Giriama, we have the Digo, we have got the Duruma, we have got the Rabai, we have got Ribe, Kambe, Jibana, we have got the Kauma and the Chonyis. So there are none tribes but they speak more or less the … they can understand one anoher. They have got a common history and language. They all originate we they all come from Shungwaya.

**Sherry Davis**

Shungwaya? Where is that?

**Jimbi Katana**

Shungwaya is actually in southern Somali close to [inaudible] in southern Somalia, along the coast. So during the 16th century, the 15th century, then there was a rivalry between the Mijikenda and the Gallas. So that is when the Mijikenda were driven south and that is where now they came and settled along or behind the coastal strip of Kenya. But the common history and the er the language is more or less the same, because there's a bit more of the same language with very few differences, but they are more or less the same in terms of culture and traditions.

**Sherry Davis** 21:09

So thank you so much for your time today Uncle Jimbi and I've got one more question for you. That has been a lot of talk about the erasure of Africans when their own African history, what do you think can be done to reclaim our stories? And how best can we honour the ancestors that paved the way for us?

**Jimbi Katana** 21:31

I think that the only thing we are able to be doing is to do a lot of research so that we can be able to unearth all these people who contributed so much in history and try to be able to honour them. Because if you do not do research then you do not know these people. But I mean, if you do a lot of research, then these people, then we can be able to write our own history. And I think today we have so many researchers, African researchers. We have people like Professor George Abungu who is doing a lot of research. [inaudible] who is actually doing a lot of archaeological research at Gede again. Again, so these are locals who are very much into into research. And that is when we get to know who actually contributed into into what we know today. And their names can be brought out. Like we did in Rabai we did some research on Christianity. There's a lot of information that we got from from from that research, apart from the missionaries who come from Europe, but a lot of local people who contributed so much in the spirit of Christianity in Kenya and in East Africa as a whole. So I think the only thing you can do is to research and to get to know who these people are, and try to honour them.

**Sherry Davis** 22:42

And it's great also how, you know, you've got experts that are academics and have have these positions in archaeology and conservation and history. But you've also worked hand in hand with local people who have helped you with that research and you've worked together to bring these stories to life office. Yes, it’s so brilliant. So although you are retired you are really really active aren’t you?

**Jimbi Katana** 23:08

Essentially I am doing a lot of work. There we are there’s a programme which is coming up we are supposed to work on our nomination for Gede national monument to be listed as a UNESCO world heritage. So I’m doing some consultancy in that particular aspect as well.There are areas where I gave my contribution and I normally go and so some work. I also do some work with Professor George Abungu who has got a consulting firm and we do a lot of work together in Zanzibar. We have done a lot of work in Zanzibar with Professor Abungu. And also in Mama Ngina drive in Mombasa where it was being upgraded to – it is now a very beautiful park. Then we had the bunkers there which belonged to the first and second world war. So we were supposed to do some restoration works. We were supposed to do some interpretation of that of the bunkers so there is so much that I am working on at the moment – yes.

**Sherry Davis** 24:03

That’s great, that’s great that you are continuing on. And you've had such a long career spanning from 1978 Up to now, which is wonderful. Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your story and your journey. Well, yeah. So yeah, truly, it's an honour to speak with you today. Thank you so much. Thank you very much. And I look forward to continuing to follow your journey. And hopefully you come back to Kenya and see you again.

**Jimbi Katana** 24:33

Have a wonderful, lovely, wonderful indeed. Yes,

**Sherry Davis** 24:36

we'll make it happen over the next year or two.

**Jimbi Katana**

Thank you. Thank you very much for the interview. Thank you so much for your time today Uncle Jimbi You are a shining example of what it means to build on the foundation. Our ancestors worked hard to lay down for us, even in circumstances of unimaginable adversity. I wonder now who might be listening to this podcast, or hearing about your work that might be the spark of inspiration to dig into their own history.

**Tom Fearon** 25:17

Thank you, Sherry. That was a fascinating interview. we're privileged to hear directly from Jimmy Katana, a Kenyan heritage professional who has been working intimately with these important issues for a lifetime. What's the key message that you would like to leave with our listeners?

**Sherry Davis** 25:33

I have so much respect for Uncle Jimbis relentless work, it leads me to realise that we make history as we find history. Whether we're academics or professionals, or artists, or teachers, or community members with an interest in our heritage, each one of us has a beautiful legacy to discover. We all have a unique perspective to share. And that discovery could very well change the game for someone else. So it's important to recognise the significant value of learning and sharing our history.

**JC Niala** 26:06

Thank you, Sherry. What would you say to community members, were thinking about researching the material cultural heritage that's held in European museums?

**Sherry Davis** 26:18

I would say having not come from an academic background, or work in this field myself, to just allow your curiosity to lead you. You can search Collections Online, attend museums, get involved in the community programmes and contribute in a way that is relevant and meaningful to you. I've been so enriched by the broad range of people coming from different disciplines in the community action research project, and then there's a wealth of information out there, so just go for it. You never know where the journey might take you.

**Tom Fearon** 26:51

We hope you enjoyed this special episode that powerfully rounds off the part of our podcast series that focused on the Swahili coast, and the impact it has had on the rest of the world. In the next episodes, we move on to the theme of religion. Join us as we look at objects from the collections that offer protection to Kel Tamasheq people who travel across the Sahara. These objects bring to light the inextricable connections between trade, Islam and spirits in the African Islamic world. We're excited to be joined by community researcher Sabrina Al-Sayed.

**JC Niala** 27:28

Thank you for listening to Afro historyscapes podcast, with JC Niala. Tom Farah and Sherry Davis. This is Afro historyscapes. always something new. Always has been always on the move.