



## Press Project Update

**30 September 2024**

### Living Cultures 2024: Reconnecting With the Objects

#### Background

The *Maasai Living Cultures Project* is a collaboration between the Pitt Rivers Museum and Maasai community leaders. The project, which began in 2017, is funded by the Staples Trust, a Sainsbury family charitable trust. It is part of the Museum's ongoing work to build equitable partnerships with Indigenous Peoples whose material culture is represented in the collections.

In September 2024 a delegation from Kenya and Tanzania visited the Pitt Rivers Museum as the next step in the *Living Cultures Project*. Members of the five families from whom the objects recognised as culturally sensitive were taken, visited the Museum to reconnect with the objects and work with our team to identify possible next steps.

The family representatives were chosen as a result of lineage research conducted in 2022/2023 to trace the families related to the objects. Where an object was worn by women, a female delegate was chosen, and likewise for the men. The delegation is led by two women, one from Tanzania and one from Kenya, to reflect the role of cultural custodians and the fact that women made all the artefacts in question.

This is the final step in the process of reconciliation and healing ceremonies with these five families. Together, we are looking to create equitable partnerships, especially with regards to knowledge sharing about how to care for and present Maasai culture in the Museum, and to continue building a partnership based on respect, trust and deeper understanding.

#### The Outcome

After a week of deliberations, the Maasai family delegates, who had been specifically selected as cultural knowledge keepers by their families, made the decision that the objects should remain in the care of the Pitt Rivers Museum. They felt that it was clear that the objects were being well cared for. This decision was reached after much discussion and deliberation and following advice from Mokompo. From a Maasai perspective, these hereditary objects would never be given away or sold (they can only be lent to family members for a very short time) and therefore, they must have been taken by killing the owner and removing it from the body on the battlefield. The objects are considered as warriors and in Maasai tradition, when a warrior dies, they are not brought back home but are buried on the battlefield. Hence, the delegates decided that it would be appropriate, given that the objects are being well cared for, that they would best be kept in the care of the Museum. This was deemed comparable to a soldier, having been killed overseas, being buried in a Commonwealth cemetery.

Having reached this decision, more cultural provenance information was shared and each family member gave further cultural guidance on how they would like the Museum to care for their objects. Because we now know the names of the original owners of these ornaments



and because these ornaments are considered to equate to the bodies of their owners, the families asked for each object to be kept in a separate box bearing the name of each owner. It was also agreed that the Maasai nation, families and individuals will have lifetime access to the five ornaments, which can be facilitated online.

The stories behind each object will also be documented and made available, in case anyone wants to learn more about the circumstances of separation and the process of healing. Interpretation materials in the form of booklets, video or audio can be made available in two languages - English and Maa, although it was flagged as a matter of urgent concern for the Maa nation, that many people, particularly women and girls, continue to lack the formal education to enable them to access this material.

### **The Legacy**

The continued presence of these objects and the legacy of the Maa-led peaceful process of *Osotua* (relationship building in peace) represents a bond for life, as the ornaments, which are referred to as 'mothers and fathers', remain in the care of the Museum, as part of a process imbued with cultural healing and relationship building. Maasai representatives will work with the Museum on future collaborations to decide how the outcomes of this unique process and Maasai cultural traditions can be best represented in the permanent galleries of the Museum, so that as many visitors as possible will learn from this process.

Further information about the *Living Cultures* Project can be found at <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/maasai-living-cultures>.

### **Delegates Visiting Oxford:**

- Samwel Nangiria Taresero – Project lead and Director of the Ngorongoro NGO Network
- Ruth Sintamei Tuleto – Project support and PALCA (Pan African Living Cultures Alliance) representative
- Eve Yiamoi Merin – Orkiaama representative Kenya
- Alice Tipap – Orkiaama representative Tanzania
- Abrahamu Yohana Laizer – Maasai videographer Oltoilo le Maa
- Noomutaitin Ene Naisho – Member of the Naisho family, Leshuta, Kenya (*Emonyorit* Earring/necklace)
- Nollmesegel Ene Sulul – Member of the Sulul family, Morijo, Kenya (*Isikira* Necklace)
- Naipaa Olonyokie Laizer – Member of the Saiyialel family, Kimokouwa, Tanzania (*Isurutia* Ring-necklace)
- Kumari Nondikeya Laizer – Member of the Mbaima family, Loliondo, Tanzania (*Orkataar* Bracelet)
- Komesha Moseka Laizer (TBC) – Member of the Moseka family, Kilimanjaro, Tanzania (*Engononkoi Narok* Blue beads necklace)

### **About PALCA**

The Pan African Living Cultures Alliance (PALCA) is an international NGO led by and for Indigenous Peoples of Africa and registered in Kenya. PALCA's mission is to safeguard



communities’ biocultural rights, support inter-generational transmission, preserve indigenous languages, promote traditional governance of natural resources, with participatory video at its heart. Currently PALCA only includes Maasai communities; however, their hope is to build the alliance between more Indigenous communities nearby, such as the Sengwer and Ogiek, as well as beyond East Africa.

**About the Pitt Rivers Museum**

[The Pitt Rivers Museum](#) is one of the leading museums of anthropology, ethnography and archaeology in the world. Established in 1884, it now has over 700,000 items in its collections and is in the top 100 most visited museums in the UK, welcoming over 480,000 visitors in 2019. The Museum was shortlisted for the Art Fund Museum of the Year 2019 for its creative programmes of reinvention and reinterpretation, which show a much-loved Victorian space challenging perceptions and demonstrating the vital role museums can play in contemporary society.

**About the Orkiaama**

The Orkiaama is the Maasai’s traditional leadership structure, which politically and culturally represents 1.2 million Maasai and was traditionally composed of a male representative from each of the 25 Maasai sections from Kenya and Tanzania. As part of the *Living Cultures* project, the Orkiaama, which had not met in 110 years, was reestablished for the 2023 visit to Kenya and Tanzania, where for each of the 25 sections, representations of one man and one woman assisted at the two opening healing ceremonies.

**FAQs**

**Q: What were the dates of the visit?**

A: The delegates visited from Sunday 22 September to Sunday 29 September 2024.

**Q: Who was in the delegation?**

A. The 2024 delegation is a diverse group with five families’ representatives, and representatives from Orkiaama, PALCA, and Oltoilo le Maa – a community video collective in Tanzania. The family members were chosen as a result of the lineage research conducted in 2022/2023 of the family from which the artifact was taken. They are the rightful lineage or the heirs of the particular wing of the family. For the families whose artifact was for women, they chose a female delegate, and those whose artifact was for men chose a male delegate.

| Sn | Family    | Artefact         | Type  |
|----|-----------|------------------|-------|
| 1  | Mbaima    | Orkataar         | Men   |
| 2  | Moseka    | Enkonongoi narok | Men   |
| 3  | Naisho    | Isurutia         | Women |
| 4  | Sulul     | Isikira          | Women |
| 5  | Emonyorit | Saiyialel        | Women |

**Q. How were the delegates chosen?**

A. The Orkiaama delegates were chosen in the Orkiaama meeting on 1 April 2024 at the Maa nation Holy Land- Endonyo Oormoruak. The traditional council of the Maa nation made the



decision to choose two women, one from Tanzania and another from Kenya to represent the nation and to reflect their role as cultural custodians and the fact that women made all the

artifacts in question. All the delegation members had the blessings of the Orkiaama as the overall leadership council in the Maa nation. Mokompo, the spiritual leader, was also extensively consulted before the decisions were made by Orkiaama and the families. He gave his blessings and guidance, particularly on the rituals, events and overall framework of the visit.

**Q: What Maasai objects does the Pitt Rivers have in its collections?**

A: The Pitt Rivers has:

95,327 objects from Africa

9443 from Kenya

2794 from Tanzania

188 attributed to the Maasai. The Maasai collection includes decorative and ceremonial objects and attire such as neck ornaments, a beadwork belt and a horn trumpet.

**Q: What are the five culturally sensitive objects?**

A:

1. Engonkoi Narok. An hereditary necklace of blue beads passed from father to son, a crucial element of initiation ceremonies. It should never be sold or given away. (Accession Number: 1904.34.25) Collector: Alfred Claud Hollis
2. Emonyorit. Earring worn by young women after circumcision, reconfigured into a neck ornament after marriage. It would never permanently stay in this state. (Accession Number: 1904.34.36) Collector: Alfred Claud Hollis
3. Orkatar/Orkataar. Hereditary bracelet passed from father to son, which should never be sold or given away. (Accession Number: 1904.34.38.1-2) Collector: Alfred Claud Hollis
4. Isikira. Head ornament worn by newly circumcised girls. It can only be used by one specific person and would always be dismantled after use. It can never be borrowed, sold or given away. (Accession Number: 1927.84.51) Collector: Rev. William Ernest Taylor
5. Isurutia. Hereditary woman's arm/neck ornament which represents the sacred bond of marriage. It can never be borrowed, sold or given away. (Accession Number: 1996.21.77) Collector: Phoebe Somers

**Q: Will the Museum return any objects to the Maasai?**

A: We have not received a claim for the return of these objects. The individual families will advise whether they want their family object to be returned home or to remain in the care of the Museum. The University has a formal process for any claim for the return of objects:

<https://www.glam.ox.ac.uk/procedures-for-return-of-cultural-objects-claims>

**Q: What is the Museum's position on restitution?**

A: The Pitt Rivers Museum acknowledges that objects in the collections were acquired through violence, looting, and by the exertion of western colonial power on 'subject' people. We aim to work collaboratively with partners from across the world towards redress on a case-by-case basis. The Museum is committed to working with stakeholders and source communities to research the provenance of the collections, consider claims for restitution, and address historic museum practices which require change for the benefit of all our visitors and global community. Further information: [www.prm.ox.ac.uk/committed-to-change](http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/committed-to-change) and [www.glam.ox.ac.uk/procedures-for-return-of-cultural-objects-claims](http://www.glam.ox.ac.uk/procedures-for-return-of-cultural-objects-claims)

