

Memory, Materiality and the Museum

Dr Fiona Kerlogue

Acting Keeper of Anthropology

Horniman Museum

Abstract

The paper focuses on how material items operate as repositories of memories, both for individuals and collectively, and the implications this phenomenon might have both for museums of anthropology and local museums. Taking as an example a collection of material from Jambi in Sumatra held in the Horniman Museum, and considering the circumstances of collection and the multi-faceted nature of the relationships between people, time and objects, the importance of objects in the preservation of cultural memory is explored.

Field research has revealed the centrality of material culture in the development and maintenance of identity and tradition. Material has the capacity to act as signifier of intangible aspects of human life and culture and to represent symbolically not only memories of individuals for family members and friends, but also of local knowledge, values and beliefs central to a community. The transmission of these core aspects of culture to each generation is often achieved through the persistence and transfer of material and material forms. It is such forms which have been both collected by museum ethnographers and preserved by communities as items encapsulating heritage. While this might suggest areas of conflict between those building museum collections and communities wishing to preserve their own cultural heritage, it may also suggest opportunities for collaboration and co-operation.