



## **Our Shared Heritage Project 2015 – 2016** (A research project exploring African stories, objects and artefacts)

# **External Evaluation Report**



**An evaluation by  
The Community Involvement Unit**



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### About IROKO

“IROKO Theatre Company use the arts and heritage as a vehicle to advance the education, health and well being of members of the public. To achieve this, we provide resources and hold training, research, exhibitions, workshops and performances using African theatre methods incorporating oral storytelling, drama, music, dance, arts and craft. Our aim is to raise awareness and preserve the knowledge of African heritage, arts, culture and history. We achieve this by taking our work to those areas in the wider communities where such African heritage and culture would normally not be seen.”<sup>1</sup>

### About Aston-Mansfield

Aston-Mansfield has been working in the heart of east London for over 130 years. We provide a wide range of community development support and activities in the London Borough of Newham, directly delivering services to around 1000 people and 900 organisations each year. Within Aston-Mansfield, the Community Involvement Unit (CIU) is a group of specialists whose aim is to grow, develop and sustain voluntary and community groups <sup>2</sup>

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1 <http://www.irokotheatre.org.uk/>

2 <http://www.aston-mansfield.org.uk/>

## **1. About the Review and Our Shared Heritage Project**

Aston-Mansfield was approached to conduct an external review for IROKO theatre company for their 'Our Shared Heritage' (OSH) Project. The purpose of the review will be to review the processes and outcomes of the project in the context it's original goals, set out in the original funding bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. The review utilises materials and data collected by IROKO throughout their project (see section 1.3), and involved no further data collection on the part of Aston-Mansfield.

The OSH Project has been a heritage project carried out by the IROKO theatre company throughout 2014 & 2015. Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the project has been run by IROKO in partnership with the British Museum Supplementary School Programme (BMSSP) as well as Barking Learning Centre, Vision-Redbridge Culture and Leisure, Goldsmiths University of London, Stratford Libraries and various schools across London.

The project focussed on connecting cultures through stories and storytelling, using objects and artefacts to help identify cross-cultural connections and tell their stories, with a particular focus on five galleries at the British Museum (BM) – African, Islamic, Asian, Aztec and European. The OSH project aimed to create opportunities for people from different cultural and professional backgrounds to use stories as a means of uncovering the connections between African myths, figures and artefacts, as well as their counterparts in other cultures.<sup>3</sup>

To achieve this aim IROKO planned a multi-stage project to engage with the public on several levels. The planned outcomes can be roughly separated into 4 elements<sup>4</sup>:

### **1. Staff and Volunteer preparation.**

IROKO recruited and trained staff and volunteers to carry out the project. This included training facilitators and trainers for workshops and volunteer researchers to explore cross-cultural heritage.

### **2. Public workshops and training.**

Training workshops for the public were organised and carried out by IROKO and the BMSSP, focussing on telling stories and exploring cross-cultural heritage through the objects and artefacts found in the galleries. A group of these participants continued training with IROKO and received a National Open College Network (NOCN) qualification in Storytelling.

### **3. Performance and exhibition**

An original choreopoem performance piece called 'The Green Stone Bead' was created based in the previous research. It was toured, along with an accompanying exhibition, around several heritage and educational sites, including the BM and several schools across London.

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<sup>3</sup> P.5 Heritage Lottery Fund Application. See Annex A

<sup>4</sup> For a full list of project outputs see Annex B

## **4.Resources and materials**

Several resources produced throughout the project were to be compiled and made available to the public. These included video and audio recordings of workshops, performances and music created for the project, a learning resource pack containing information about the stories, objects and cross-cultural links explored throughout the project and a quiz that accompanied the performance.

### **1.2 Goals and aims:**

From discussions with IROKO staff and reviewing the Heritage Lottery Funding application the aims of the project can be broadly separated into two, interrelated areas:

#### **1. Increasing knowledge and understanding of heritage and of its cross-cultural links:**

- To identify and record heritage information that is often lost through a diaspora, and explore the cross-cultural links within.
- To provide better interpretation and explanation of heritage information for the public.
- Extending heritage learning to those who would not normally experience or engage with it.
- Increasing community cohesion through increased awareness of heritage and culture.
- Increased knowledge and understanding of the BM and heritage sites, bringing more people to them.

#### **2. Increasing Capacity:**

- Of individuals and partners through training and education.
- Of IROKO through training staff, gaining experience and building strategic partnerships and public profile.
- Of local heritage and sectors through training partners, increasing understanding and capacity to facilitate heritage work and by building connections between organisations and people.

### **1.3 Data Review**

This evaluation is based on materials and evaluation data collected by IROKO throughout the project. These include:

- The original Heritage Lottery Funding application, outlining the goals and the scope of the project.
- Several resources and materials produced as part of the project.
- 44 feedback surveys collected from the British Museum Training sessions
- 7 feedback surveys completed by trainees taking the further, accredited course in Storytelling.
- 99 feedback surveys completed by audience members at the exhibits and performances of The Green Stone Bead.

- Feedback from partner organisations
- Demographic information recorded from participants and audience members of workshops and performances.
- Theatre review of The Green Stone Bead performance and exhibit
- A Masters dissertation incorporating one OSH volunteer's experience of the project.

## 2. Project Review

In order to assess the projects outcomes against its goals we will review each of the four project elements listed above in reference to the stated goals of the project.

Overall the project met or exceeded each of their targets. Across all stages IROKO monitoring suggests that the projects reached 3747 people directly, exceeding their target of 3082, while the social media reach of the project through Facebook alone is 93,245 people (defined as unique people for who information about the OSH project appeared on their 'wall').

Of those who were asked where they heard about the performance they attended, social media was the largest factor after word of mouth (*Table 1*). Of those who replied 'Other' the majority were told of the performance by museum staff while at the BM already. While this is an interesting indication of the effectiveness of publicity methods, too few people were asked to get a real sense.

*Table 1.*

How did you hear about the performance?	Count
Social Media	12
Advert/Magazine	3
Word of Mouth	17
Other	8

### 2.1 Staff and Volunteer Preparation

At the beginning of the project IROKO recruited and trained staff and volunteers to carry out the various components of the project. A target of 5 research volunteers was set to explore cross-cultural heritage through stories, myths, objects and artefacts to feed into the workshops and the creation of a performance piece, this target was exceeded with 6 researchers trained. 4 workshop leaders also received training to carry out sessions based on the information produced, as did the IROKO creative team, culminating in the creation of “The Green Stone Bead” a new play centred around the materials researched by the volunteers.

As well as identifying and sharing cross-cultural heritage knowledge, the skills gained from these trainings will have lasting benefits for the participants involved and their work in the heritage and education sectors. Examples of benefits can be seen in the BM feedback, who highlighted an increased understanding of the collections that staff can use in their work, as well as gaining insight into training with different groups and contexts which will aid in planning future trainings<sup>5</sup>.

IROKO also benefits directly from the training and experience gained throughout such a

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<sup>5</sup> See annex

project. As well as building connections with partner organisations, IROKO can build connections with a pool of trained volunteers and professionals to help in future project delivery. Partner feedback was entirely positive about the experience of working with IROKO and all organisations involved expressed a desire to work with IROKO again in the future, demonstrating the how the project can raise the profile, increase the resilience and improve the effectiveness of the organisation within the community. This is further evidenced in new working partnerships that IROKO has developed through the project with The British Library and The Barbican Centre. Another concrete example of improved profile and partnerships is that the creative director, Alex Oma-Pius, has been hired by the Museum of London, following their work together on the project, and is currently working as a freelance teacher in their Supplementary School.

Discussing direct benefits to IROKO staff Alex noted that the project was a useful learning experience for key staff such as the Project Administrator, working in new areas and gaining understanding of the sector and the local community, and for the Project Coordinator who gained further experience in project monitoring and financial reporting.



*Staff and volunteers plan the project with examples objects and artefacts to be used*

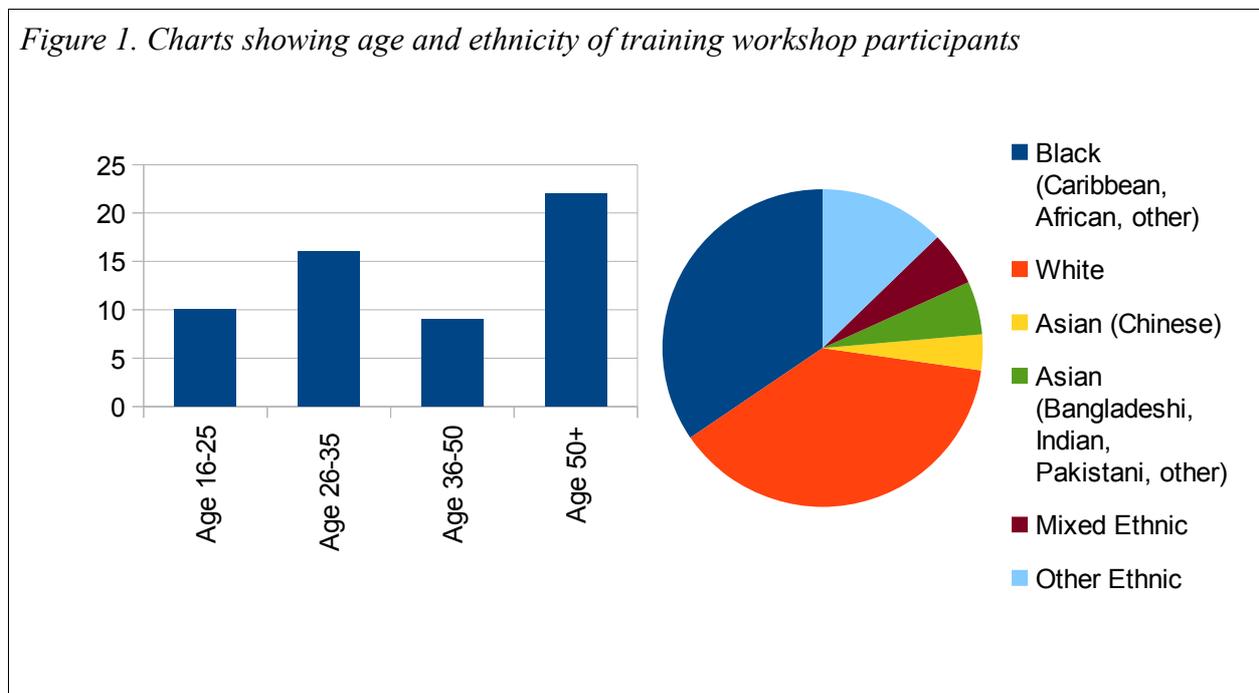
## **2.2 Public Workshops & Training**

IROKO initially planned to carry out 3 half day training sessions with the BMSSP for 15 people per session. These sessions were oversubscribed leading to a fourth session being added and a total of 69 participants completing the workshops. The further training also exceeded its target with 12 trainees completing the course and receiving National Open College Network accredited IROKO certificates.

## 2.2.1 Participant Demographics

Participants in the workshops were much more likely to be female with 55 women and only 14 men taking part. IROKO's suggestion that this is generally representative of the heritage and education sectors that the workshops drew on does seem to explain this. While the largest age group across all of the trainings was over 50s the general spread of participant ages is good, with a balance of participants from 16-25 up. The diversity of the group, across age, culture and background, was something praised in the participant feedback (see below).

Figure 1. Charts showing age and ethnicity of training workshop participants



## 2.2.2 Feedback

The concept of combining the museum galleries, heritage education and training in storytelling proved popular and successful. It was an innovative and effective way of achieving the projects goals, simultaneously sharing cross-cultural heritage knowledge while increasing peoples ability and effectiveness to further communicate these ideas.

In feedback surveys participants were asked to describe the top three things that they would take away from the sessions. To help analyse these responses each statement was assigned one of 5 categories as can be seen in Table 2 below. Some responses fell into more than one category.

Table 2, Categories of reported benefits

Category	Examples
Knowledge	"Information about different deities", "Research on Mami Wata"
Skills	"How to use objects in storytelling", "Getting classes more involved"
Values	"That we are all connected", "A greater appreciation of other cultures"
Experience/ Entertainment	"The dancing!", "Enjoyment of dance, song and storytelling"
Other	"You must never trust a naughty woman wearing a pointy hat... :( "

Of workshop participants who completed the surveys, 77% reported new knowledge as at least one of the top 3 things taken from the training, 73% named at least one skill, 43% named at least one value and 39% at least one experience. In total, responders reported skills and knowledge with equal frequency (See fig. 3), followed by Entertainment/Enjoyment and Values. Although we can only draw limited insight from this due to its subjective nature it provides a good general picture of what the participants felt they gained from the process and demonstrates in broad terms the success of the workshops in raising cross-cultural heritage knowledge and the skills to convey it.

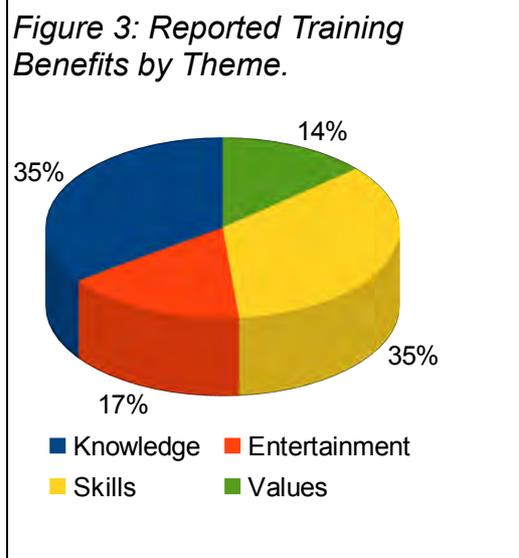
A more in depth review of the responses further supports this with a large number of participants citing specific skills and techniques learnt through the workshops. The most common skills cited were the use of objects to create and tell stories and methods of creating audience participation and engagement. When referring to knowledge and information that they would take away from the training many referenced the cross-cultural links that they had discovered in the objects and stories that they were studying.

Another recurrent theme for participants of the museum workshops was an increased knowledge and interest in the BM and several people reported learning how to better visit, understand and guide others around the galleries.

A significant amount of respondents stated that the diversity of the group, meeting new people and sharing experiences from different backgrounds and cultures was a highlight of the sessions. This highlights both the broad reach of the project and the potential for similar projects to build connections and capacity in the local heritage and community sectors.

In terms of suggestions for improvement the most common request by far was for more time, particularly in the galleries, highlighting the level of engagement and enjoyment of participants.

Feedback from partner organisations consistently agreed that their work with IROKO had enhanced their service delivery. As well as the benefits for BM staff described above, feedback from the Barking Learning Centre cited staff training at the workshops as a benefit to service delivery, while Stratford Library reported that the project had allowed it to explore new ways of delivering cultural and educational information.



*“Maybe the time can be a little longer as it went too, too fast. It is true that time flies when an event is enjoyable.”*



*Workshop participants at the British Museum*

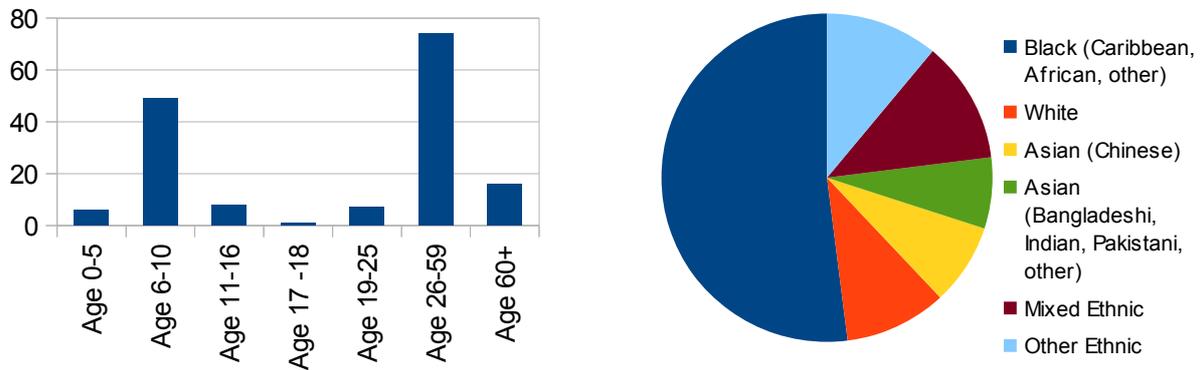
## **2.3 Performances and Exhibits**

Initial targets were to take the performance of *The Green Stone Bead* and its accompanying exhibition to 4 venues and 5 schools. Again these targets were exceeded with a total of 5 venues and 15 schools experiencing the project.

### **2.3.1 Audience Demographics**

Audiences were diverse (Fig.4), with a majority of Black and Minority Ethnic members. This is in line with the cross-cultural goals of the project and the aim to share heritage information with audiences from many backgrounds. Audiences at the public performances appear to be equally divided by gender while the largest groups by age were adults 26-59 (42%) and under tens (31%). 11-25 year-olds will be the hardest demographic to engage with in heritage projects such as this, and so their low turn-out to public performances is unsurprising. This makes the project's work with schools and universities particularly important in engaging young people and reaching those who would not normally be exposed to such work.

Figure 4: Charts showing the Age and Ethnicity of Green Stone Bead Audiences



### 2.3.2 Feedback

Audience response to the performance through feedback surveys was overwhelmingly positive, with many glowing comments including:

***“Well devised, energetic and thought provoking”***

***“The audience of all ages were enthralled. A wonderful way to teach about the cultural and mythological aspects of Africa. Thank you.”***

***“I enjoyed the story itself, the engaging way it was shared and the fun ending with everyone joining in! Excellent job!”***

The performance also received an unexpected review from a London theatre website who gave the show 5 stars, writing; *“This tasteful, family-friendly musical is well choreographed, well directed and well performed.”*<sup>6</sup>. The review praised the show's engagement with the audience through participation, post-show food and refreshments, and the resources provided to give context to the performance. Writing about the incorporation of research and heritage work into the performance the review said “The beauty of The Green Stone Bead lies in its theatrical simplicity – and its rather more complicated background.”. The writer of the play stated that the positive review has given him a lot more confidence to try more challenging creative work in the future, potentially expanding IROKO's creative scope.

Of 99 responses only a handful had criticism or suggestion for improvement. More labels and descriptions for the exhibits to aid context was suggested by one audience member as well as by one partner organisation. More time for the Q & A and more engagement with the children were the only other suggestions given about the performance.

A significant number of respondents expressed a desire to see the performance and exhibit tour more widely, and promoted more for example:

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.londontheatre1.com/news/108578/iroko-theatres-the-green-stone-bead-at-goldsmiths-uni/>

***“It would have been extremely beneficial to schools across London to be informed of this event. Need to look at widening your participation and your publicity”***

Feedback from partner organisations that hosted the performance also suggested that publicity could be improved in the future. One commented that posters and publicity materials could have been clearer to help audiences understand the nature of the event. Given the slightly complicated nature of the performance as one element of a wider project this is understandable but might deserve attention in the future. Two partners also both felt that more pre-performance consultation with the venues about the project could help to give staff more confidence in promoting the show.

When asked whether the performance was a fun way of sharing information and raising awareness, 99 of 99 respondents answered yes. Although the question was slightly leading, and the performance was free, the 100% positive response still demonstrates high levels of audience enjoyment of the event.



*Performers in costume playing the tricksters Esu, Ananse and Monkey*

The accompanying exhibit to the performance, which contained objects and replicas of artefacts along with descriptions, added context and depth to the performance, enhancing the experience as a heritage event. One audience member described it as: ***“An excellent exhibition which contextualised the performance. Both can be build upon.”*** The exhibit toured with the performance and provided context for the show to help learning and understanding but was also left for extended times at some venues or schools to maximise its reach. In the coming spring the exhibit will be shown at St Edmund Primary School on the Isle of Dogs at the request of the head teacher there.

The fact that performances were free, and in places which people may be visiting for a variety of reasons, appears to have been a double edged sword. There is definite evidence in the feedback that many people discovered and attended the performances as

a result of being at the venue already, this was also confirmed by Stratford Library who reported that the event brought lots of families into the Library. However some partners noted that, potentially because of its free nature, people in the audience arrived and left at different times in the show, which limits the context and understanding of the performance and therefore its effectiveness at conveying information, this can be seen by the confusion of some audience members who appeared to believe The Green Stone Bead was a traditional myth or story rather than an original piece. This issue is not significant, and is dependent on funding conditions, but may merit consideration in future projects.

The Goldsmiths' performance and exhibition was preceded by a lecture on "The Myth of Mami Wata across West Africa" by Prof. Osita Okagbue and followed by a buffet of West-African inspired food. Feedback from audience members consistently referred to the lecture and knowledge of Mami Wata as something they would take away from the event. Emily Feltham, a volunteer who incorporated the OSH project into her MA dissertation, noted that the academic setting and preceding lecture brought a more adult and academic-minded audience, enhancing the projects reach. She argued that the largest difference for the Goldsmiths performance, however, was the buffet following the performance, turning the event into a more festive and celebratory occasion, where communal eating and sharing of foods facilitated conversation, bringing people together and furthering understanding of shared heritage<sup>7</sup>.

Many audience members praised the shows 'family-friendly' nature with several appearing to view it primarily as children's entertainment. While promoting the show at the BM, Emily Feltham found the most likely phrases to attract to museum visitors used the keywords "Free African Theatre, family-friendly". She attributed the shows appeal to families and young children as being largely down to the location and time of the show (Sunday at 2.30pm), but also potentially as an effect of taking performance theatre out of traditional spaces or perhaps influenced by the simplistic stereotypes which some associate with African theatre and arts<sup>8</sup>. While these are interesting discussions they are not ultimately of great importance in this review. Through giving the performance in a variety of contexts, the show reached a wide variety of audiences including families, heritage workers, students and academics. The nature of the performance, with the exhibit and resource packs, allowed audiences to take as much or as little from the performance as they could, from small children who could enjoy the colours and energy of the performance to adults who could understand the interwoven stories and myths and discover cross-cultural connections.

## **2.4 Resources & Project materials**

Learning Resource Packs were created for audiences of The Green Stone Bead performance, containing information on the project, the performance and the objects, artefacts and stories uncovered throughout the project. This included learning on a range of national curriculum subjects, such as RE, Arts, History, Geography, PSHE & Citizenship, ICT, English, Literacy, Drama, etc. which will benefit the projects engagement with school children and the schools ability to incorporate the project into their work. Audience feedback, including the theatre review mentioned above, commented on the benefit of the resource pack and reported learning from it. For project of this nature, with several stages, the resource pack is a neat way of tying together the various elements and giving the audience context to gain greater understanding. A quiz was included for audience

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<sup>7</sup> Emily Feltham, "Putting the 'Muse' into 'Museum'" MA Dissertation, University of East Anglia 2015

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

members to take during and after the performance and exhibit, which is now available online along with the learning resource packs and information about the OSH project. This is another example of how IROKO interacted with participants, making them think about and engage with the content of their project rather than being passive observers, and in doing so increasing the accessibility and understanding of heritage information.

A CD was produced containing all of the songs written for The Green Stone Bead, recording the music and work for future posterity. As well as increasing the reach of the project, Alex Oma-Pius noted that the connections made with a new recording studio and artists would benefit IROKO in future work. A problem that arose in the digital distribution of the CD was that funding conditions for the project potentially prohibited the distribution of the CD through for-profit channels such as Youtube. This is a good example of the lessons that are learned throughout a project, building IROKO's experience and ability to carry out similar projects.

A video documenting the project and performances has been created and is available to view through the IROKO website<sup>9</sup>. This will be another avenue for taking the project to new audiences and sharing the heritage learning gained through the project and is also an interesting insight into how the project worked and progressed, which may be useful in informing and inspiring other groups and similar projects.

### 3. Monitoring & Evaluation

Throughout the project a good quantity of monitoring and evaluation activity was carried out with outputs recorded and tracked throughout and either video or survey feedback gathered from participants and audiences at almost every stage of the project.

There is room for improvement on the quality of the feedback, notably the questionnaires, which could be better thought out, with more clarity in the purpose of the questions being asked and the information desired from the respondents. However there is evidence that IROKO adapted and improved their surveys throughout the project, for example including a question which asked where audience members heard of the project or which organisation workshop participants worked for. Other interesting questions could have looked at whether trainees could apply their learning in their work or personal lives, whether events changed attitudes towards the sites in which they were held (such as the BM) or tested knowledge of cross-cultural connections made.

Simple questions such as asking workshop participants to rate the training, or asking audience members to rate the performance in terms of entertainment and education, can provide quick and quantifiable feedback to use, as well as being useful for comparisons to help evaluate changes and improvements throughout a project.

Adjusting the style of questions could also provide more informative and relevant responses. For example, audience surveys of The Green Stone Bead asked: *"In your opinion, will stored information about the project be beneficial to future generations interested in learning about heritage? Yes or No"*, to which 100% of respondents said yes. We are limited in what we can actually learn from this response; the vague nature of the question and yes/no response options will tend to create 'yes' responses, while it is unclear how public audiences views relate to actual benefits to heritage learning. One way to gain more understanding from such a question would be to use a scale response rather

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9 [www.irokotheatre.org.uk](http://www.irokotheatre.org.uk)

than yes/no to gauge the intensity of a respondents opinion and allow a neutral option to help avoid a positive bias, for example:

*To what extent do you agree with the following statement: 'Stored information about the project will benefit future generations interested in learning about heritage'*

1. *Strongly Disagree*      2. *Disagree*      3. *Don't Know*      4. *Agree*      5. *Strongly Agree*

There is evidence that IROKO responded to, and incorporated, feedback throughout the project. In it's partner feedback the BM describes the partnership with IROKO as 'responsive' and cites changes made to later workshops following feedback from participants (see Annex C). The 'Green Stone Bead' play was also altered as a response to audience feedback from the first performance, while other examples include setting performance dates and exhibition times based on partner feedback, and plans to redesign the companies website to make the most of the new resources available there (based on a User Experience survey).

The expansion of the project, in workshops and performances, was also in response to consistent positive feedback and demand.

## **4. Conclusions**

The OSH project was very well received by all involved, including training participants, audiences and partner organisations. The strength of the project undoubtedly lay in its multi-faceted approach with different stages engaging with participants in different ways increasing the impact and reach of the project. There is evidence of positive impacts from each outcome and the selection of partners and venues allowed the project to reach a wide range of people including families, students, academics and heritage and education workers. Notably, the extensive touring of The Green Stone Bead around schools in London brought the project to groups who would often not be reached by such heritage learning and entertainment. Positive feedback from the addition of a preceding lecture and following food and drink reception at Goldsmiths highlight the possibilities for expanding the depth and breadth of engagement and learning through incorporating varied elements in similar future projects.

Many aspects of the projects legacy have been outlined in the body of the review above. Increasing knowledge and understanding of heritage and cross-cultural links, increasing the skills of people and organisations to share that information further and building the capacity of IROKO and of their strategic partners, have all been direct results of the project. Examples of unexpected legacy outcomes from the project include its use to influence a teacher training program on 'cross-culturalism' and the project outcomes being used to develop a new IROKO programme, the IROKO Bright Stars Project described as “..a new community and skills development project focusing on introducing local people to museums and galleries.”

The project achieved or exceeded all of its original targets, training more people and performing for larger total audiences than expected. While this is fundamentally a sign of its success, it may indicate the need for a clearer (perhaps more optimistic!) definition of scope in future projects, with the possibility of more preliminary research into demand for

the project. The extension of the project is not without cost; the Project Director has currently spent a total of 825 hours on the project, 43% more than the 576 budgeted, with the project still to finish completely. While the financial costs of this appear to have been absorbed by full-time IROKO staff, to their credit, this is not an ideal or sustainable solution and highlights the need to better understand the scope of a project at the initial planning and funding stages.

The overwhelmingly positive feedback and demand for the OSH project can be seen through responses given from all involved and the number of extra performances and schools visited. At time of writing there are still performances planned in 2016 that have been specially requested and IROKO plans to apply for further funding to take the performance and exhibit to yet more schools and venues. With a finished performance piece that has proved popular and effective at engaging people in heritage learning, IROKO have a fantastic opportunity to reach even greater numbers of people and to share the heritage and cross-cultural links that they have discovered throughout the OSH project.

## **5. Annexes**

**Annex A** – OSH Heritage Lottery Fund Application

**Annex B** - OSH Project Outputs

**Annex C** – Partner Feedback