

Expressions of Nationhood in Kenyan Museums

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The first four decades of Kenya's independence were characterised by politically-induced historical amnesia, whereas the last seven years have been a time for attempting to remember the 'forgotten' past. As a signal of change, the government has been building monuments and mausoleums to commemorate some freedom fighters. It has also appointed a national taskforce to collect views on the criteria for identifying national heroes and heroines, presumably with a view to using the heroes and heroines in promoting the concept of nationhood. The state-owned National Museums of Kenya appear to have borrowed a leaf from the Kenyan government's orchestration of historical amnesia for it only mounted an exhibit on Kenya's history in December 2010. In contrast, community peace museums, which are independent of government and operate at the grassroots level, have been commemorating local heroes and heroines for the last two decades.

This paper discusses representations of 'nationhood' at the National Museums of Kenya and the community-based peace museums. The representations have ranged from the virtual absence of exhibitions on nationhood to exhibitions of material culture associated with specific ethnic groups and commemoration of local and/or national heroes. Some of the representations appear to be informed by the expressed and/or assumed wishes of the country's political leadership whilst others are informed by influential individuals or small sections of the community. This situation contributes to contestations of 'nationhood' in Kenya, a phenomenon that has come to the fore with every general election since the re-introduction of multi-party politics in the early 1990s and, in particular, with the recent (2007-2008) post-election violence.