Expressions of Nationhood in Kenyan Museums

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Introduction

The institution museum is defined in Kenya's statutes as 'a public or private institution which collects, preserves, analyses and exhibits objects of cultural and natural heritage' (Republic of Kenya 2006: section 2). At the present, there exist three types of museums in the country: (a) the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), (b) community peace museums (CPMs), and (c) private museums. The first of these is state-owned and is responsible for managing all state-owned museums, sites, and monuments, plus the Institute of Primate Research which conducts primate ecology and biomedical researches. Besides mounting exhibits and displays for public viewing, NMK is responsible for conducting research in academic disciplines: archaeology, botany, ethnography, geology, ichthyology, ornithology, palaeontology, palynology, phytochemistry and zoology, to name a few. It is worth noting here that history is not among the disciplines.

Private museums are generally small outfits located in rural areas or in small urban centres. They hold collections of ethnographic objects and memorabilia and are owned by business people, retired teachers, ex-Mau Mau fighters or enthusiasts of African cultures. CPMs are located within given communities, where they exhibit ethnographic objects associated with traditional peace-making and peace-building artefacts, memorabilia and peace gardens. CPMs are run largely on the unpaid time and labour of curators, committees or boards of local elders and enthusiasts of African cultural heritage from the community within which they are located.

Of the three types of museums, this paper focuses on NMK and CPMs, the former being represented by Nairobi National Museum, Meru Museum, Kariandusi Site Museum and Hyrax Hill Site Museum and CPMs by Aembu Peace Museum, Agikuyu Peace Museum and Lari Memorial Peace Museum. As we shall learn presently, representations of 'nationhood' in these museums range from the virtual absence of exhibits on nationhood to exhibits of cultural objects associated with specific ethnic groups and valorisation of local and/or national heroes. Representations at NMK appear to be informed by the expressed and sometimes assumed wishes of Kenya's political leadership. As such, the social memory evoked by the representations has suffered stasis for most of the time, and sporadic disruptions especially in recent times. On the other hand, representations at CPMs are, to a large extent, informed by influential individuals or by small sections of the community. They also tend to concentrate on the ethnic group within which they are located, thus articulating local as opposed to national issues. This situation contributes to contestations of 'nationhood' in Kenya, a phenomenon that has gained prominence with every general election since the re-introduction of multi-party politics in 1991 and, in particular, with the 2007-2008 post-election violence (Republic of Kenya 2008).

Meanings of Heritage

In practice, NMK and CPMs attach different meanings to the term heritage. For NMK, which is the legally recognised custodian of Kenya's cultural and natural heritage, cultural heritage comprises artefacts, fossils, monuments, physical structures; and natural heritage includes natural features of outstanding universal value from the aesthetic or scientific point of view; geological or physiographical formations of special significance, rarity or beauty; and areas that are or have been of religious significance, use or veneration (Republic of Kenya 2006: section 2).

This is hardly surprising granted NMK's history**.** From its foundation in 1910 the nucleus museum focused on natural history, with archaeological, palaeontological and geological researches gaining in importance from the 1930s after the opening of the larger Coryndon Memorial Museum. The Coryndon became the National Museum upon Kenya's attainment of independence in 1964 (MTK 1963/64). Subsequently, it was renamed Nairobi Museum and more recently Nairobi National Museum. The focus on archaeological, palaeontological and geological phenomena, antiquities and monuments that NMK is internationally known for has, over time, been articulated in statutes (Republic of Kenya 1984a and b, 2006). Inevitably this focus has rendered the academic subject of history unimportant at NMK. Indeed, the institution is yet to employ a professional historian, hence its lack of the internal dynamics that would have facilitated the establishment of a gallery addressing colonial and postcolonial history.

CPMs, on the other hand, have very broad views of what heritage entails. Their definition is similar to UNESCO's in that it includes both tangible and intangible heritage.[1] For CPMs, heritage includes material culture, indigenous knowledge, religious practices, rituals, indigenous food crops and food production systems, poetry, song, proverbs, riddles, stories, dance, art, peace trees and other plants, biological and physical environment, sites of memory, oral traditions, performing arts, social and cultural practices, festive events, and production of traditional crafts.

This definition is broad enough to accommodate 'the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through…[intangible heritage] from one generation to the next'.[2] This is of great importance to minority groups and to those with low levels of literacy or none, of which Kenya has a considerable number. Equally important is the fact that intangible heritage is an important vehicle for 'maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization…[since] understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities helps with intercultural dialogue, and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life.'[3] For CPMs, all of these are essential in fostering peaceful coexistence within and between communities.

National Museums of Kenya's Exhibits

As one would expect, the varied definitions of heritage translate into significant differences in the nature and composition of exhibits and in the manner in which NMK and CPMs present objects and information to the visitor. NMK holds vast collections, including hominid and other fossils, archaeological artefacts and skeletal remains, ethnographic objects, skeletons of modern animals, geological samples, plus bird, insect, arachnid, reptile, mollusc, fish and plant specimens. Of these, NMK exhibits for public viewing only a tiny fraction; some of the exhibited objects are replicas.

Exhibits that are likely to provide evidence of expression of identities and/or nationhood or to serve as spaces for selective ordering or erasing social memory at Nairobi National Museum are in the Hall of Kenya, Cycles of Life, History of Nairobi National Museum and History of Kenya galleries. The History of Kenya Gallery was opened in November 2010 and has been researched by my colleague, Lotte Hughes; it is therefore not discussed in this paper.

The Hall of Kenya exhibits the country's heritage, with sample representations of nature, culture and history. The paintings and photographs on display are identified by ethnic group. Interestingly, although the majority of Kenya's 42 ethnic groups are unrepresented in the gallery, the exhibit includes two paintings of individuals from Southern Sudan!

Of the Kenyan ethnic groups named in the Hall of Kenya and the Cycle of Life exhibits, emphasis is given to the Maasai. This appears to be a deliberate attempt to cater for the foreign tourist market given it resonates with Kenya's tourism sector's extensive use of Maasai imagery in advertisements. The foreign tourist market is important for NMK's income generation granted a tourist pays eight times what a citizen pays as entrance fees at the Nairobi National Museum. In addition, the tourist

pays US $100 to view the original hominid skeletal remains in the Cradle of Humankind gallery's secured section.

The Cycle of Life exhibit consists of artefacts associated with key stages of life in traditional and modern Kenya. Like the photographs and paintings in the Hall of Kenya, the artefacts here also carry ethnic identities. As we shall learn presently, this is also the case at NMK's regional museums and CPMs, hence the conundrum of defining Kenyan nationhood.

Unlike the Nairobi National Museum, exhibits in the regional museums are generally dated and static and address issues identified by researchers and exhibit designers based at the Nairobi headquarters. Exhibits at Kariandusi Museum, consist of archaeological artefacts (Acheulian handaxes) and replicas of some hominid fossils. The history, identities or material culture of the people living in the vicinity of the museum are not addressed at all. It is as if, in the eyes of NMK, the area's history ended with the Acheulian archaeological period, which may explain why the local population does not visit the museum.

Hyrax Hill Museum exhibits archeological artefacts and material culture of the inhabitants of the Rift Valley region. Curiously, the exhibit includes a few artefacts from the Mbeere who live several hundred kilometres away (this was a departure from the exhibit script to which I was privy). Apart from identification of the artefacts by ethnic group, the exhibit does not afford the visitor a glimpse of the history of the peoples concerned, let alone of Kenya as a nation.

Meru Museum presents archaeological, palaeontological and ethnographic exhibits, plus an outdoor section exhibiting reptiles, a Columbus monkey and plants. Except for the Meru ethnic group's identity, the exhibit is silent about nationhood and national history. Sections of the exhibit associated with Meru identity include a diorama of a Meru elder, woman and boy, artefacts associated with bee-keeping and rites of passage, plus tools and weapons. There are also old black-and-white photographs depicting Meru, Tigania and Tharaka dancers and Chuka drummers.

Curiously, the Prehistory Gallery, which exhibits archaeological artefacts and casts of hominid skulls, also features contemporary photographs of a Gabbra elder, Luo dancer, Luo medicine-man, Maasai girl, Samburu warrior, and Swahili woman with child. Except for the Maasai and Samburu who have had historical interactions with the Meru, the rest live hundreds of kilometres away thus raising questions about the choice of the peoples represented in the images. The guides are unable to explain the rationale behind the photographic exhibit, in terms of its ethnic composition, or why groups neighbouring the Meru like the Borana, Embu, Gikuyu and Kamba are not mentioned anywhere in the museum in spite of the fact that they have a shared history with the Meru. Yet, there is space on the wall where more portraits could be exhibited.

The exhibit's ethnic composition may have been determined during the construction of the exhibit. The fact that NMK designs and develops all exhibits in Nairobi, with hardly any consultations with regional museum personnel, provides considerable room for individuals designing or building the exhibits to include objects to fill in empty spaces or to attempt to influence visitors' memory of the faces or objects displayed. This may explain why there are two portraits of Luo people in Meru Museum, Mbeere artefacts in Hyrax Hill Museum and portraits of Southern Sudanese in Nairobi National Museum.

Except for the dated nature of some of the archaeological and palaeontological exhibits, the prominence those exhibits are accorded at Nairobi National Museum and at Kariandusi, Hyrax Hill and Meru museums underscores NMK's contribution to knowledge about human and cultural evolution. This emphasis is probably not accidental, granted addressing phenomenon of greater antiquity is safe politically because it is remotely related to the politics of the day, unlike the more

recent periods whose interpretation is contested (e.g. Ambrose 1982; Collett and Robertshaw 1983; Robertshaw 1991; cf. Bower 1991; Dale 2007; Karega-Munene 1996, 2002; Kusimba 1999; Prendergast 2008; Schmidt 2009; Wandibba 1980).

The contestation and sometimes invention of history extends especially to regional museums whose employees are neither trained in museology, history, archaeology nor palaeontology. As such, there is a tendency to pass on assumptions as proven facts. For example, on a visit to Hyrax Hill Museum in the late 1990s when I was working for NMK, I overheard the 'curator'[4] explaining the Sirikwa Hole phenomenon to visitors as 'proven' evidence of the occupation of Hyrax Hill by the Kalenjin – an ethnic group that has been constructed during the last 60 years (Karega-Munene 2010) – several hundred years ago. This illustrates one of many forms that heritage presentations can take and the susceptibility of such presentations to 'distortion for many kinds of reason' (Boniface and Fowler 1993:11). The curator in this case was bundling ethnic identity (her own) with land rights.

Community Peace Museums' Exhibits

CPMs only exhibit material culture and contemporary objects like art, photographs, paintings and peace trees. Also, unlike NMK which exhibit only a very small portion of their vast collections, CPMs tend to exhibit original artefacts and everything in their possession. Consequently, the visitor sees multiples of objects. Whereas state museum exhibits are in glass cases, those of the CPMs are exhibited in the open where the curator and visitor can touch or hold them.

The rationale behind the CPMs' approach is best explained by two of their curators who reason:

> [A] community peace museum is not a store of objects, but a resource centre for a community. The museum is established for posterity…[and] belongs to the community who are the key visitors. If we make community peace museums centres of attraction for foreign tourists, we shall lose our traditions as we seek to cater and please tourists. If our people visit community peace museums, we shall succeed in reviving and maintaining our cultures and traditions. Akamba Museum must conserve Akamba culture, traditions and customs.[5]

> [A community peace] museum to the African is not just a building where objects are stored or exhibited, but also gatherings where people exchange information about their history and culture among other things.[6]

The Agikuyu Peace Museum exhibits include a reasonably wide range of ethnographic objects: containers for food, honey, water and mead; drinking vessels; farming implements; ornaments and musical instruments. Also included are original receipts of hut/poll tax dating from 1939 to 1954 and photocopies of black-and-white photographs showing white police officers conducting body searches of Mau Mau suspects with the help of African Home Guards; naked Mau Mau suspects standing before piles of their clothes; white police officers searching huts for Mau Mau suspects; the Lari Massacres of March 1953; Gikuyu elders (ex-Mau Mau fighters) and Mau Mau Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi Waciuri. The text for the exhibit is extremely scanty. Apart from the photographs of the Massacres, the ex-Mau Mau and Kimathi, the rest of the exhibit is not captioned. The caption for the Lari massacres reads: *The Devastating Lari Massacre[s] – 25th March 1953*; for ex-Mau Mau *Elders (ex-Mau Mau)*; and for Kimathi *Good Men Must Die but Death Cannot Kill Their Names!* This latter is employed in the curator's narrative to underscore Kimathi's unmatched virtues and selflessness, hence his valorisation both as a local and a national hero.

Exhibits at Lari Memorial Peace Museum consist of photocopies of black-and-white photographs of the March 1953 Lari Massacres and ethnographic objects such as traditional wooden seats, gourds, calabashes, pottery and musical instruments. Also displayed are objects used in peace ceremonies by

the Maasai, Keiyo, Luhya, Kamba, Rendille, Dorobo/Ogiek, Nandi and Tugen ethnic groups. The exhibits generally do not have any text, an observation we shall be returning to.

Exhibits at Aembu Peace Museum include gourds, calabashes, pottery, traditional stools, flywhisks, traditional dress, drinking vessels, tools and implements. Also included are paintings of sacred sites, trees, Embu beadwork, and a few named individuals. There are also artefacts from the Pokot, Teso, Maasai and Kamba ethnic groups, plus a few artefacts that are shared by the Embu and Tharaka. Interestingly, local Mau Mau heroines or heroes like General Kubu Kubu are not commemorated in the museum; rather, General Kubu Kubu is commemorated through local school and street names. This is probably because, unlike at Lari and Agikuyu Peace Museums where the council of elders includes individuals who were directly involved in the Mau Mau war, the Aembu council of elders associated with the museum were underground Mau Mau operatives.

Besides exhibiting material culture, Agikuyu and Aembu Peace Museums have an important outdoor section, the *living museum*. The section is so-named because it consists of living trees and other plants associated with indigenous peace-making and peace-building traditions. Parts or products of the peace trees and plants are employed in bringing peace in a conflict situation, say, between warring individuals or groups. The trees and plants were selected and planted by the curators, elders and visitors over time and are tended by the curators and volunteers. According to one curator, 'peace trees are more important [to CPMs] than signed visitors' books; peace trees are living testimony, whilst [filled up] visitors' books end up in cabinets' where they remain hidden from view.[7]

Museums and Nationhood

As we have noted above, none of the state-owned or community peace museums has exhibits that really address nationhood in a serious manner. This is intriguing in view of the fact that NMK has been, and still is, legally defined as the custodian of Kenya's natural and cultural heritage and, therefore, serves as '*national repositories* for things of scientific, cultural, technological and human interest' (Republic of Kenya 2006: section 4 (a); emphasis added). The heritage that is exhibited at NMK is mainly biological and cultural, with significant emphasis on the archaeological, palaeontological and palaeoanthropological past. The historic past, which includes the period before the advent of colonialism and the colonial and postcolonial periods, all of which are essential in addressing the emergence of the Kenyan nation-state, is absent.

This situation appears to be a consequence of two factors: (a) NMK's history and official policy articulated a few years after independence stating natural history was the 'principal activity of the museum';[8] and (b) the historical amnesia induced by founding President Jomo Kenyatta's urging of Kenyans to forget the past, by which he meant the divisive Mau Mau struggle. To Kenyatta, 'all Kenyans fought for *uhuru*' (independence), a position he deliberately took in order to promote reconciliation and nation building (Clough 2003; Lonsdale and Odhiambo 2003). That the independence euphoria and Kenyans' reverence of Kenyatta did not allow for serious debate on the merit or otherwise of his amnesia legacy has, to a large extent, contributed to the loud silence regarding realisation of nationhood. Kenyans continued to bask in 'the bliss of amnesia', to borrow Huyssen's words (2003:10).

Although in the 1960s and 1970s there was a need to develop exhibits about the historic period in order to promote nationhood, NMK as then constituted could not play that role. Richard Leakey, former NMK Director/Chief Executive, offers several reasons for this. To start with, NMK's budgetary allocation by the Treasury was too small to allow for development of a proper history gallery. Secondly, it was felt that the development of a history of Kenya gallery (or museum) was 'not within the scope of anyone at the museum', granted the institution did not have a professional historian on staff. Thirdly, there was a need 'to protect seventy years of investment' in natural history and prehistory, which made NMK one of the most 'important scientific collections' stations' in

Africa. Therefore, it was felt that dismantling any of the natural history exhibits to make room for a history of Kenya exhibit was not the best way to get things done. Fourthly, the Board of Museum Trustees was chaired by Ferdinand William Cavendish-Bentinck 'who had been a leader of the opponents of [Kenya's] independence', a situation that made it 'awkward... to explore some of these avenues'. Consequently, a conscious decision was made 'not to change the museum's focus from natural history and prehistory to social [and political] history and to leave…[that] component to another Government body'.[9]

These circumstances conspired against promotion of nationhood through NMK. Kenyatta's desire to ensure political stability and minimise disruption to Kenya's economic production and social affairs meant perpetuation of the status quo, with sons of colonial chiefs and some Europeans continuing to occupy key positions in government (Ndegwa 2006). The colonial Board of Museum Trustees continued to influence policy and decision making at NMK, an institution whose foundation and representations of identities, life and history were 'deeply influenced by the power of the colonial elite' (Karega-Munene 2009:78) and certainly needed some shake-up. Indeed, by December 1963 when the Kenyan nation-state was born, the Board was made up of European colonial appointees, the only exceptions being one Asian and two Africans. Further, the Board's chairman, Cavendish-Bentinck, had served as a Board member since 1939 and as chairman since the mid-1950s until 1970 (MTK 1961/62 and 1962/63). Yet, granted the country's experience of a divisive struggle for independence, there was urgent need for concerted efforts in forging nationhood.

NMK's focus on natural history and prehistory meant responsibility to develop history galleries fell on the Kenya National Archives. But that was not to be because the National Archives did not get the requisite funds from the Treasury. As a result, the Archives only managed to display the material culture they received from the late Joseph Murumbi, Kenya's second vice-president.

In the early 1970s, however, NMK attempted to address certain aspects of the struggle for independence, and by implication Kenyan nationhood, by mounting a pictorial exhibit in the Nairobi Museum as part of Kenya's 10th independence anniversary celebration:

> I put up the exhibit [of about 150 black-and-white photographs] of history up to independence…. It was an attempt to participate in, for the first time, a historical activity and was focused...on the 10th anniversary of independence...we had no choice but to go to the archives, the *Nation* and the *East African Standard* [newspapers] and get photographs and put them up with…captions from the newspapers. We had no historians on board...and we had…budgetary restraints. We did negotiate and got given as the centrepiece [of the exhibit] the Harry Thuku [founder of the Young Kikuyu Association in 1921 and the East African Association in 1922] painting…a very valuable piece of art done by...Samuel Johnson, a Black American artist, who was commissioned by the Kenya Government to do paintings of the Kenyatta arrest [on 20 October 1952] and a couple of others. We acquired…[the painting] as a gift and it served as the centre piece…it was a very big painting of the settlers and police opening fire on the crowd who were gathered to demand the release of Harry Thuku in 1922.[10]

NMK did not develop an appropriate text for the exhibit, but borrowed captions from newspapers and even exhibited some of the photographs without captions. That was because (a) the exhibit 'was not particularly encouraged by the government' and (b) the government discouraged the museum from 'put[ting] any interpretation of any political nature' on the exhibit. In addition, the Ministry of Natural Resources under which NMK fell was of the view that 'there still was a lot of sensitivity about the loyalists' and freedom fighters' roles [in the struggle for independence] and… that it wasn't really in the interest of the state or the museum to be presenting [the exhibit].' To the government, NMK was, through the exhibit, trying to engage in an 'intellectual exercise…that was better left to

university history departments and cultural centres.'[11] This reasoning partly explains why the history of Kenya as taught in Kenyan schools, colleges and universities is yet to really contribute towards the realisation of nationhood.

Indeed, Kenya is yet to come to terms with her past, not only because of the politically orchestrated amnesia, but also because Kenyan professional historians have shied away from educating Kenyans about their past. The historians are yet to produce a volume on the history of Kenya or to interrogate the making of modern Kenya. In addition, their silence on the politically instigated violence Kenyans have experienced since the early 1990s amounts to abdicating their responsibility to journalists, political scientists and lawyers who have increasingly assumed the role of public historians. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that history alongside anthropology, archaeology and philosophy – as opposed to science and technological subjects – has been identified as unimportant in the realisation of *Vision 2030* by a former Minister for Higher Education Science and Technology.[12]

It is worth noting that from the outset, the pictorial exhibit was deemed controversial even before it was opened to the public:

> …we asked for somebody [then Vice President Daniel Moi] to come and open…[the exhibit]. Geoffrey Kareithi, Head of the Civil Service, said...he wanted to come and see it in case there was any sensitivity…. [H]e brought with him Jeremiah Kiereini who was the Permanent Secretary for Defence. Those two were on different sides in the lead up to independence [Kiereini on the loyalists' side and Kareithi on the freedom fighters' side]. [The two] felt that they would go round…[the exhibit] together and decide if any picture offended either of them or was likely to raise issues for either of them…. I remember we took down…seven pictures that offended either one side or the other.[13]

The exhibit lasted for several years, possibly into the 1980s. This author recalls viewing a small de-contextualised photographic exhibit of the Mau Mau experience in the Museum in the mid-1980s. The black-and-white photographs, each measuring about four by six inches, were thumb-tacked onto a soft board and were devoid of text; the exhibit remained in place until the mid-1990s when it was pulled down (Karega-Munene 2009). It is not clear whether that exhibit was a remnant of the larger pictorial exhibit mounted for the 10th independence anniversary. What is clear though is that, until November 2010, NMK did not have an exhibit of Kenya's history. Sensitivity surrounding the struggle for independence, which was appropriately symbolized by the previewing of the pictorial exhibit by two senior government officers, continues to the present largely because the struggle for Kenya's independence remains contested (e.g., Branch 2009; Clough 1998; Edgerton 1989; Kinyatti 2009a and b; Maughan-Brown 1985; Ochieng' 2002; Odhiambo and Lonsdale 2003; Wunyabari 1994).

The only other significant exhibits in the Museum addressing some aspects of Kenyan nationhood were mounted in the 1990s, namely, the 'Indigenous Methods of Peace Building and Reconciliation' and 'The Asian African Heritage: Identity and History'.[14] The latter exhibit employed objects, photographs and documents in its exploration of labour, social and intellectual heritage. The first of these themes addressed precolonial contacts between India and East Africa, culminating in the importation of Indian labour for construction of the Uganda Railway in 1896-1901 and in subsequent establishment of Indian (Asian African) businesses in nascent urban centres along the railway line. The social heritage theme was captured by historical photographs of Asian African families that reflected the families' views about themselves, their dress and adornments and cultural practices like prayers, festivals, betrothals and weddings. Also captured in the photographs was the establishment of welfare amenities like schools, clinics, and hospitals. Intellectual heritage covered the community's involvement in political activism, trade unionism, and provision of legal defence to nationalists like Jomo Kenyatta and Mau Mau fighters in courts of law (Anonymous, n.d.).

Although the Asian African exhibit touched on thorny subjects like the struggle for independence and assassination of Pio Gama Pinto in February 1965 (Odinga 1967), NMK enthusiastically embraced it.[15] More significantly, NMK created space for the exhibit by dismantling a large stuffed mammals' exhibit in the present Nairobi National Museum. The enthusiasm so demonstrated may be explained by two factors: (a) the exhibit was externally funded, meaning NMK would have a new exhibit without incurring any expenditure; and (b) the exhibit provided NMK with an opportunity to replace a static exhibit of animals that could be viewed alive at Nairobi Animal Orphanage or in National Parks and Game Reserves. More importantly, the fact that Asian Africans focus their efforts and other resources on industry and commerce renders them politically 'invisible' and, therefore, 'non-threatening'. Ironically, development of the exhibit coincided with the dismantling of the small decontextualised Mau Mau exhibit.

Unlike the Asian African exhibit that occupied a whole gallery, the exhibit on indigenous peace building and reconciliation methods was rather small. It consisted of objects used in peace-making and peace-building mainly among pastoralists. Unlike the Asian African exhibit which addressed historical issues, the peace exhibit addressed contemporary issues but steered clear of the 1991-92 politically instigated ethnic conflict. Undoubtedly, such attempts would have earned the wrath of Daniel arap Moi's government (Karega-Munene 2004). The exhibit subsequently travelled to places like Kitale and Kapenguria to the west and north-west of Nairobi, within reach of pastoralists.

In comparison, CPMs which, as we have noted above, are a recent phenomenon and severely constrained in terms of space, funding and human resources, have made limited but commendable attempts to advance debate at least at the local level about the struggle for independence and nationhood. These attempts were especially evident during and after the 2007-2008 post-election violence, an issue we shall be returning to presently. First, let us discuss the narratives rendered through CPMs exhibits.

The scantiness and/or absence of text in CPMs' exhibits makes it difficult for visitors to make much sense of them without a guide. Without guiding, visitors to Agikuyu Peace Museum, for example, who lack significant knowledge of the Mau Mau war cannot make sense of the exhibit. But when one is taken through it by a guide, a wonderful narrative of grievances against colonialism leading to the war is rendered. The narrative ties a thread through all seven sections of the exhibit, emphasising traditions of peace-building and peace-making in the traditional Gikuyu community whenever conflict occurred. Colonisation, the narrative continues, disrupted traditional cultural, social, political and economic order; expropriated land for European settlement; and levied the detested hut/poll tax. These were among the main causes of the struggle for independence that culminated in the Mau Mau war. Kenya, the narrative continues, owes her independence to the sacrifices made by patriots like Dedan Kimathi Waciuri. Thus, for CPMs, the guiding makes exhibits 'speak' to the visitor as the guide brings to bear all the knowledge he – the curators are invariably male – has about a given subject. This effectively turns the museum into a 'stage' where curators and exhibited objects are important players/actors (Ernst 2000).

The narrative at Lari Memorial Peace Museum is woven around the Lari massacres exhibit. It begins with the advent of colonisation and the resultant grievances: loss of land to European settlement, loss of property and wealth through taxation and displacement, plus loss of dignity and freedom. These led to the outbreak of the Mau Mau war whose aim was to regain lost land, property, dignity and freedom. The massacres happened during this war. The initial massacre was carried out on the night of 26 March 1953 by Mau Mau fighters and resulted in the torching of houses, killings and maiming of men, women, children and livestock belonging to families that were deemed loyal to the colonial administration. The revenge massacre against families considered loyal to Mau Mau took place the following day and was carried out by the colonial administration. It resulted in the commission of

rape, killings of men, women and children and confiscation of property. Inevitably, the massacres sharply divided the Lari community into Mau Mau and Home Guards, a polarization that continued into independent Kenya. The need to bring the two camps together is largely the *raison d'etre* for the museum.

This explains why the photographic exhibit is devoid of text, except for the date and name of the location where the killings occurred. Next to the exhibit, however, are names of the victims of the massacres and short descriptions of the places where they were killed. The names are not matched with the photographs in any way. According to the narrative, the victims' names are listed 'to give life to the photographs' in order to effectively communicate the horrors of the experience to visitors.[16] The names of perpetrators of the massacres are not given as this would reopen old wounds, thus defeating the reconciliation efforts the museum spearheads. It is for the same reason that the museum does not commemorate local heroes or heroines. Some of the heroes and heroines (who are invariably Mau Mau and whose heroism is whispered in conversations), are members of the museum committee, where they share the platform with ex-Home Guards as a sign of reconciliation. This has, in turn, resulted in the thawing of hitherto open hostility as well as some marriages between the offspring of ex-Home Guards and ex-Mau Mau.

The narrative ties a thread between the massacres and the material culture in the exhibit, the latter being explained as symbols of peace in traditional communities. Peace is equated to sustainable use of the environment and good health (hence the exhibition of food, milk, honey and water containers), to beauty (as evidenced by the smooth skin and roundness of the gourds), to gifts of relationships (as evidenced by the adornments), and to greetings whenever people meet. Some of the material culture is used to sensitise visitors on gender issues and to emphasise the sanctity of human life, hence the importance of peace-building and peace-making in society. For example, the Gikuyu word *nyũngũ* has two usages: (a) the earthen pot which serves as a cooking vessel and (b) the womb. The grinding stones are symbolic of the sexual organs and sex act, where the lower grinding stone is the female and the upper grinding stone the male. Traditionally, these objects were treated with utmost respect, which was echoed by self respect in human relations.

The narrative at the Aembu Peace Museum, where the exhibit is also without text, is largely in terms of the need (a) to promote peace, self respect and industry, especially among the youth. The aim is to help the youth to avoid becoming susceptible to manipulation by politicians to unleash violence during elections, and (b) to help the youth to abstain from taking local brews and chewing khat (*Catha edulis*), a herb that causes excitement, loss of appetite and euphoria (Carrier 2007). Cultivation of khat was introduced to Embu a few years ago. A thread is tied through the exhibit and environmental conservation, which explains the museum's deep involvement in the identification, conservation and promotion of the communal use of sacred sites. The community, the narrative continues, must have access to sacred sites in order to be reliable custodians of the same. Kaguma sacred site, for instance, has been used for religious retreats by youth affiliated to the Anglican Church of Kenya, Pentecostal Churches and Akorino/Arathi (African Christian pacifists).

A few years ago the museum successfully propagated gourds in its compound and gave seeds to some farmers to grow their own for domestic use and for the market. This is considered a successful outreach exercise because it enhances the museum's role and image in the community. According to the curator, Njiru Njeru, this was an attempt to remind the community that traditional containers were efficient in their usage, inexpensive and environment-friendly, unlike the ubiquitous plastic containers. The effort has paid off as gourds and calabashes are back in use in local homesteads. According to the curator, the Museum has the responsibility to grow indigenous food crops in order to promote food security, granted most of these are drought resistant.

Museum Exhibits and Memory

Museum exhibits are powerful mnemonic devices for expressing a people's past. That is because we 'depend heavily upon our eyes for information about the world, and much that we process and remember is visual' (Morris and Gruneberg 1994:34). But we also remember things we can touch or hold better than we do things that are behind glass cases. The nature and presentation of the exhibits for public viewing is therefore important as it determines the context and the manner in which they are to be remembered. As such, the exhibits play a crucial role in forging 'relationships between [the] past and [the] present' that aid the formation and perpetuation of social memory (Healy 1997:5). Exhibits at NMK and CPMs are no exception; they are important and powerful arenas for formation of social memory because, like other museums, they deliberately choose the terms through which we remember our past (Healy 1997:75). In this context, we perceive memory as the human capacity to retain information and to employ it in constructing and revising past experiences, usually for present purposes and occasionally for use in future. This view presupposes memories are retrievable from given storage. While this may generally be the case, memory is also created and/or revised when needed; it is also deconstructed, distorted and re-created for purposes of enabling a people to attain or drive a given agenda. Inevitably, therefore, memory can be accurate, partly accurate or inaccurate, grossly inaccurate or plainly false, all of which is known to happen in Kenya.

That politics plays a crucial role in 'shaping the way society thinks about its past' (Herf 1997:9) is not in doubt. This helps us to appreciate Kenyatta's historical amnesia as an expression of his desire to: (a) unite the citizenry 'all [of whom] fought for *uhuru*'; (b) de-emphasise Mau Mau's contribution to *uhuru* in order to check demands of entitlement from communities associated with Mau Mau; and (c) ensure there was minimal disruption in economic production by encouraging settlers to stay on so that Kenya could benefit from their expertise. As desirable as these goals may have been, they had the negative impact of discouraging debate on nationhood. Kenyans appear to have assumed the magic of nationhood would simply rub on. The amnesia was so contagious that it also affected NMK, hence its shying away from taking up the responsibility of developing exhibits on the country's history, which would have either contributed towards shaping the nation-state's social memory or ignited debate about nationhood. Except for the change of name to the National Museum of Kenya in 1964, NMK continued operating as it had done during the colonial period. Policy failure on the part of the government allowed the colonial Board of Trustees, among who were opponents of independence like Cavendish-Bentinck, to remain in office, thus presenting NMK administration with difficult choices.

NMK's failure to develop a history gallery and the absence of a reasonably comprehensive publication on the history of Kenya has resulted in the absence of a national or state narrative about the struggle for independence and the postcolonial period. This has, in turn, left the country at the mercy of politicians who, like the Kenyan *jua kali* (informal sector) artisans who beat crooked sheets of metal to obtain desired shapes and objects, purposely panel-beat information about the past to shape group memories. As a result, Kenya's political memories have been shaped by self-interest, feelings of entitlement and the drive for raw political power. Inevitably, the narratives constructed along these lines have resulted in the evocation of negatively charged emotions, aspirations, myth-making, and memories of grievances (e.g., Morrison 2007; Munene 2002, forthcoming; Ogot 1999). No doubt, addressing such memories through museum exhibits would not only be difficult for NMK and CPMs, but also undesirable due to their divisive nature.

However, as an institution, a museum is capable of shaping or influencing feelings of nationhood and patriotism largely because by its very nature it serves as a house of memory, without which 'intelligent behaviour becomes impossible' (Morris and Gruneberg 1994:30). A museum also has the ability to reach a wider and mixed audience in terms of educational, cultural, social, political and economic backgrounds and varied ages than any other learning institution. As such, it can help a people to acquire and use knowledge about their past in a manner that enables them to: (a) appreciate their heritage, (b) understand who they are, (c) make sense of their present circumstances and

experiences, and (d) plan effectively for their future (Karega-Munene 2009; Morris and Gruneberg 1994). This can, in turn, help make the world we live in a less 'terrifying and dangerous place' (Morris and Gruneberg 1994:30).

Thus, both NMK and CPMs can help create narratives that can make their local visitors start to identify themselves as Kenyans and to regard the country as a safe place for all. Their exhibits can be designed in a manner that they 'deliberately forge memories in physical form to prevent the natural erosion of memory' (Crane 2000:9), thus evoking images of nationhood, rather than the flashes of Kenyan-hood experienced during periods of national distress like the August 1998 bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi and the 2007/08 post-election violence. One hopes museums in Kenya and, in particular NMK, will not squander the opportunity provided by the current constitutional dispensation and political mood which has given rise to a genuine need for the country to come to terms with her past.

NMK's presentation of a homogenised version of the past in its exhibits, given its national responsibilities, would be a commendable step towards using the country's past to build the present and the future. Ensuring the social memory evoked by such exhibits is not static is essential because dated, static exhibits will only encourage Kenyans to continue forgetting more than recalling their past for the simple reason that forgetting is convenient and not disturbing. In so doing, however, NMK must beware that homogenisation may elicit contestation, revision, deconstruction and reconstruction granted humans are 'memory workers, [who engage in] recalling and forgetting, selecting, ordering and erasing memories' (Healy 1997:5). Such a development could infuse dynamism into debates about nationhood, thus encouraging CPMs' bottom-up approach in developing exhibits that address nationhood, where focus on local issues inevitably lead to addressing national issues.

The new constitution's decentralisation plank may give a new lease of life to CPMs, given museums are now to be a responsibility of county governments, rather than of central government (Republic of Kenya 2006, cf. Republic of Kenya 2010). That many of the counties are single ethnic group entities, suggests Kenya is likely to witness the emergence of 'tribal' museums, which could play positive roles, serving as avenues for empowering communities (Child 2009) or could become instruments of balkanisation at the expense of nationhood. Given Kenya's political history, it would not be surprising if attempts are made by some county governments to take over state regional museums or community museums with a view to propagating divisive narratives. Caution must, therefore, be exercised in order to ensure such developments do not arise and that the mistakes made during the transition from colonialism to independence are avoided so as to forge meaningful nationhood.

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[1] UNESCO website: http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00002, accessed 21 July 2010.

[2] UNESCO website: http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00002, accessed 21 July 2010.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] The designation 'curator' at NMK and CPMs is used for staff who are in charge of a museum. Except in a few instances, curators are generally high school graduates often without professional training but with considerable experience as research assistants.

[5] Timothy Gachanga, curator of the Akorino Peace Museum, during curators' visit to Akamba Peace Museum, 6 February 2010.

[6] Waihenya Njoroge, curator of Lari Memorial Peace Museum, during curators' visit to Lari, 12 September 2009.

[7] Munuve Mutisya, curator of Akamba Peace Museum, during curators' visit to his museum, 6 February 2010.

[8] Memorandum on 'The Status and Functions of the National Museums' by R.H. Carcasson, Director of the National Museum, 16 January 1966, NMK Archives.

[9] Richard Leakey, interviewed at Nairobi, 3 August 2010.

[10] Leakey, *ibid*.

[11] Leakey, *ibid*.

[12] *Daily Nation*, 14 September 2010. Vision 2030 is Kenya's blueprint for development by 2030. It aims at transforming Kenya into a newly industrialised middle-income country by 2030. The Vision is 'anchored on three key pillars: Economic; Social; and Political Governance'. The social pillar 'seeks to create just, cohesive and equitable social development', which certainly requires knowledge of Kenya's history (Republic of Kenya 2007:vii).

[13] Leakey, *ibid*.

[14] These were designed and developed by Somjee who graciously invited this author to their previews.

[15] This author attended the initial meeting (at Somjee's invitation) where officials of the Asian African Heritage Trust and NMK administration discussed plans for the exhibit.

[16] Waihenya Njoroge, remarks during tour of Lari Memorial Peace Museum exhibit, 13 October 2010.