

'Promoting Peace through Dialogue: Facilitating cultural exchange visits in Kenya'

Lotte Hughes

The Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies,
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The Author Lotte Hughes (l.hughes@open.ac.uk), The Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

**Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies
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Promoting Peace through Dialogue: Facilitating cultural exchange visits in Kenya

Lotte Hughes¹

“Ethnic differences have torn apart our lovely nation. Deliberation of elders and youth from different ethnic groups, sharing with one voice, was an indication that peace is possible. We built trust and shared deep insights on the way forward.”

Njiru Njeru, curator, Aembu Community Peace Museum, October 2009

After the 2007/08 post-electoral crisis which tore Kenya apart, leaving an estimated 1,300 people killed and 650,000 displaced, shocked Kenyans asked themselves a host of questions including: Is there any such thing as Kenyan nationhood? If so, what? How did our country fragment so quickly in such a frightening way? How did we arrive at this low point in our history? How much do we really know and understand one another? Will Kenya ever be the same again? Can we ever trust each other again, and if so how do we build trust? How can we make and maintain peace, while also achieving justice for victims?

In the collective soul-searching and intense public debate that ensued, some local scholars claimed that Kenyans were probably living a lie (Wekesa 2010). Kenya might be a state but certainly not a nation because it lacked fundamental components (Ndung’u 2010). Many Kenyans damned the orchestrated amnesia which has characterised this post-colonial



Akamba women dancers greeted visitors from different communities to the museum at Kyanzasu, Machakos. Photo: Karega-Munene

state since independence in 1963, and which continues to serve its political leaders only too well. *Kwani?* magazine, which features cutting-edge new work by Kenyan writers, photographers and

¹ My thanks to colleague Karega-Munene for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper. Our thanks go to all participants, and especially the local organisers in CPMF, who helped to make the visits such a success.

artists, posed the amnesia question in its two-part issue on the crisis, *The Fire This Time* (2008). In asking Kenyans to contribute to the *Kwani?* Testimonial Project, a collection of “statements of what happened” from people involved in all sides of the conflict, the editors wanted to get Kenyans to speak for themselves and speak quickly “before people could forgive and forget. Because judging by the last 45 years (to take the short view), few of us truly do either. The collective amnesia that so easily settles in and reduces history to a vague euphemism – ‘our little mistake’, to use a Presidential



Paul Njembui Thuku, Chair of the Museum's board
in Agikuyu Community Peace Museum, Nyeri. Photo: Heather Scott

example – has time and again been swept aside when the opportunity came to remember and avenge”. (Kopecky 2008: 48). In the same vein, editor and award-winning writer Binyavanga Wainana wrote: “Already outrage is being forgotten. It is being suggested everywhere that the post election madness was a sort of anomaly, let us go back to where we were and it will be all right. As writers, we have said no to this” (Wainana 2008: 17). A special issue of *Wajibu*, a local journal dedicated to social and ethical concerns, called on Kenyans to redefine themselves. An editorial declared: “The emotions that surface in the reactions of the predominantly youthful authors [contributors to this issue] are incomprehension,

disappointment, disillusion, indignation, as well as anger at Kenyan leaders for proving to have such large egos that the welfare of the country no longer seemed to matter. These reactions should not surprise us. In 2007 more youth voted than at any other time in Kenya's history, and they felt betrayed” (Wanjohi and Pabari 2008:1).

Opinion polls in the Kenyan media showed that expressions of trust among Kenyans sharply fell after the crisis (cited in Branch *et al* 2010: 254-5). These authors considered that the underlying

trends which led to the crisis revealed “the fundamental failure of the nation-building project in Kenya” (*op. cit.* 2010: 244). A kind of “competitive multiculturalism”, promulgated by presidents Kenyatta, Moi and Kibaki, was partly to blame for the lack of national culture, and has resulted in a “‘survival of the fittest’ approach to managing ethnic diversity [which has] failed to build a coherent Kenyan identity” (*op. cit.* 2010: 245). They noted how the increasing violence of the 1990s had hardened ethnic identities.

Some of the less-informed international media wrongly characterised the whole crisis as ‘tribal’, when in fact it was politically instigated (and has been so with every general election since re-introduction of competitive politics in 1992). Ethnic tensions are real enough, but the underlying issues include poverty, youth unemployment, colonial legacies that include unequal access to land and resources and other historical injustices, and cynical exploitation of supposed ethnic ‘differences’ by politicians. Nonetheless, it was clear from the events and their aftermath that profound levels of distrust and fear existed between some of the 42 ethnic groups that make up the Kenyan population. Many citizens are deeply ignorant of one another’s histories and cultures, and have erected imaginary walls between ethnic communities, failing to appreciate the shared histories, narratives, memories, cultural practices and values that unite them. This is partly a result of the fact that citizens have been deliberately kept ignorant by successive ruling elites, starting with the regime of first president Jomo Kenyatta, and a comprehensive written history of Kenya does not exist - only histories of individual ethnic groups. Kenyan historians are partly to blame for this situation, since they tend to write and publish histories of their own communities. A retreat into ethnic enclaves, which produces essentialised identities and casual daily racism at best, ‘hate speech’ and racist violence at worst, has become a way of life that few had really questioned until this crisis point.

Into this scenario stepped a research team comprising British, Kenyan and Swedish scholars from a range of disciplines (history, art history, anthropology and archaeology).² We set out to study contemporary heritage activities, in both the state and non-state (civil society) sectors, from an historical perspective. Put simply, we aimed to examine, document and analyse the different ways in which Kenyans at every level are engaging with their past(s) in the present time. We became particularly interested in community-led heritage activities, including those of so-called community

² ‘Managing Heritage, Building Peace: Museums, memorialisation and the uses of memory in Kenya’, 2008-11. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) of the UK. Project website: <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/ferguson-centre/memorialisation/index.html>

peace museums – a phenomenon unique to Kenya, which had not been studied before. They are not aimed at tourists and foreigners but fellow Kenyans, and most receive no state or external funding.³ What I will go on to describe was not, however, part of this larger study but an unexpected off-shoot of a partnership element of the research, funded by the British Academy through its 2007 UK-Africa Partnership Scheme Award to me and Prof. Karega-Munene (United States International University, Nairobi), who is also involved in the larger study. We had been working together since 2006, originally using seed money from the Ferguson Trust, on issues around heritage, history and memory in Kenya.

Aims of the visits

We proposed to bring together fairly small numbers of people (20-35) from across the country, to visit each others' community museums and other heritage sites, and learn from one another. The majority of these museums are situated in rural areas, and most people cannot afford the cost of travelling long distances to make such visits for themselves. Our aims were to foster and facilitate inter-ethnic and cultural dialogue and understanding; to advance networking between different museums; and to promote information exchange and knowledge sharing generally, about peace traditions and other matters to be identified by the groups themselves. Many of these museums had previously worked together as members of umbrella groups the Community Peace Museums Programme (CPMP) and the African Initiative for Alternative Peace and Development (AFRIPAD). But these had broken up, and new NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) formed, including the renamed Community Peace Museums Foundation (CPMF).

Old friends were no longer to speaking to one another. Some asked us for news of former colleagues, who had trained together as field assistants in the peace museums movement under Dr Sultan Somjee, former head of the ethnography department at National Museums of Kenya, and founder of this movement. He has since moved to Canada, though remains in touch with his former field assistants. Several people told us they would welcome the opportunity to get together again, and find new ways of working collaboratively, under the auspices of our project. Karega-Munene

³ These small museums are a relatively new phenomenon in Kenya; privately funded, they were developed in the early 1990s by Dr Sultan Somjee, and grew out of a Material Culture Project he initiated. Broadly speaking, they aim to celebrate and conserve the heritage of particular communities (such as Maasai, Gikuyu, Akamba) while also using peace traditions (such as the planting of peace trees), and artefacts associated with peace, to unite different communities. However, inter-ethnic peace making is no longer the focus of some museums, which have become cultural resource centres focused on single communities.

and I found ourselves in the position of mediators and go-betweens, something we had not envisaged when we began our study. We decided to turn a potential problem into a virtue.

Plans welcomed

When we ran the idea past some key contacts, the response was immediate and positive. “The exchange visits are superb and such a powerful tool in connecting communities”, said Daniel Salau, a young Maasai man from the Ngong-based NGO Simba Maasai Outreach Organisation (SIMOO). “We have had such visits in the past. It is amazing how powerfully the communities are bonded.” Njiru Njeru, curator of Aembu Community Peace Museum at Nembure near Embu town, replied: “Good to hear this brilliant idea. Our nation is experiencing a great shake-up as far as harmonious and peaceful coexistence is concerned and something has to be done ... Cultural heritage projects have the potential to guide our societies to realize inter-ethnic cohesion, and I do hope this idea will promote this.”



Maasai elder Koimarish Ole Mulo addressing visitors to Lari Memorial Peace Museum. Photo: Karega-Munene

Three visits were organised, with help from the museums curators who formed a steering group to plan them: the first to Lari Memorial Peace Museum, Kimende, in the former Rift Valley Province⁴ (12 September 2009); the second to Akamba Community Peace Museum, Kyansazu, Machakos, Eastern Province (6-7 February 2010); and the third to Agikuyu Peace Museum, Nyeri, Central Province (26-28 August 2010). The curators and other local people associated with the museums chose the themes for each day’s discussion, and organised the timetable. We provided transport

⁴ Provinces have now been abolished under the terms of the new constitution.

from Nairobi to the museums, and reimbursed transport costs from home to the city, as well as providing accommodation in Nairobi on the outward and return journeys, where necessary. At the visits themselves, we took a back seat and only spoke if invited to do so. After all, it was not our day but theirs. Most importantly, we all shared a delicious Kenyan meal (prepared by local women, with food and catering costs met by us) – and at Kyansazu, we also danced and planted peace trees together, which was wonderfully symbolic, as well as fun.

The first visit: Lari Memorial Peace Museum

The theme for the day, chosen by the young people and elders who run the museum, was ‘Embracing Modernity in our Peace Museum Activities’. This included a discussion about how to make the best use of new technology, including mobile phones and the internet, in peace education, which is carried out in local schools and supported by the Mennonite Church of North America (which has a Nairobi office).



Stanford Chege, secretary of Lari Memorial Peace Museum.

Photo: Francis Muritu

Thirty people associated with community peace museums in different parts of Kenya travelled up from Nairobi by bus. Six different ethnic groups were represented at this first event: Gikuyu, Aembu, Maasai, ‘Dorobo’,⁵ Suba and Yaaku. For me, the success of the day was partly measured by the fact that on the outward early morning journey the occupants of the bus were fairly silent. Mind you, it was very cold on the top of the Rift Valley escarpment, and we hadn’t yet drunk enough hot sweet tea – the Kenyan staple. On the way back, it was like listening to a flock of starlings – everyone was excitedly talking, laughing, joking, and discussing ideas and plans with new friends, or renewing old friendships.

⁵ Attendees self-identified as this. ‘Dorobo’ is not in fact a discrete ethnic group, but a derogatory term for former hunter-gatherer communities (better known by their individual names, such as Ogiek) that stems from British colonial days.

Lari was the site of a traumatic double massacre in March 1953, during the Mau Mau struggle against the British colonial power, colloquially known as the struggle for land and freedom (Anderson 2005). The legacy of these painful events is still evident in this small town, about an hour's drive north of Nairobi. Mau Mau supporters attacked so-called Loyalists and their families, and African soldiers under British command brutally retaliated; atrocities were committed by both sides. Lari Museum was founded to help reconcile the two, and its management committee is made up of former Home Guards, African paramilitaries who fought under British command, and former Mau Mau fighters. This division is not, however, as simple as it sounds. (See Branch 2010 on the nuances of the broad spectrum of collaboration and resistance.) Together, they work to commemorate the historical events that once divided them, and seek to educate people about the lessons learned.

Before this event, most of the visitors did not know anything about the massacres or the museum's reconciliation work. Kenyan history is not taught much in schools, or only very selectively. In the morning the visitors had an opportunity to visit the museum, and learn about its activities. The artefacts on display include body adornments, gourds and other objects that symbolize peace in different ethnic communities. Also on show was the beaded peace tree, centrepiece of a project that aims to promote peace between different communities. As the small 'tree' has travelled around to different districts, people have beaded a 'branch' using colours that signify peace in their ethnic group.

The afternoon was devoted to discussion and speeches. Kabooro wa Tumbo, chair of the Lari Museum Board, electrified the audience with stories about his experiences during the Mau Mau struggle. "British colonialism took away our property and wealth – land, cattle, sheep and goats. It also terrorized and abused us, and had us beaten by its agents, the Home Guards. This is why we decided to fight for our property and freedom". In his address, Lari Museum curator Waihenya Njoroge said: "We (Africans) have lost our identity and cultures. We do not seem to know who we are. Yet there is a Kiswahili saying, '*mwacha mila ni mtumwa*, a person who has lost their culture is a slave'. Lari Museum exhibits traditional artefacts to remind us about our cultures. The aim here is to encourage the African to be proud of their cultures and African-ness."

He spoke about their peace education programme in schools, adding: “We are also aware that people outside schools need peace education.” Citizens will be able to use the library that is being developed as a community education resource centre.

The discussion that followed was wide-ranging. It included agreement on the urgent need to help and encourage unemployed youth, and involve them somehow in peace museum activities.

Maasai elder Koimarish Ole Mulo, from Kajiado District, who has travelled to the United States and South Africa as a ‘peace ambassador’, noted: “There is a need for us to see ourselves as Kenyans, not as members of this or that ethnic group. Politics is divisive, therefore we must be careful.” He urged participants to take the ideas they had shared about peace to other Kenyans, in order to benefit Kenya as a whole.

Subsequent visits – Akamba and Agikuyu museums

The second visit was to the Akamba Community Peace Museum, near Machakos town, when the theme was ‘Documentation of Cultural Heritage Knowledge in Peace Museums’. The length of the visit was increased to two days by popular demand, because this gave people more time to travel to the site via Nairobi, and more time for discussion. The visit drew 32 participants, who included non-museum people such as three elders from a Giriama cultural association on the Kenyan coast – the Malindi District Cultural Association (MADCA), which promotes the commemoration of anti-colonial rebel leader and national heroine Mekatilili wa Menza; Brother Albato, a member of staff at Tangaza College, Nairobi (which offers peace studies, and is part of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa); and Olivier Marcel, a French doctoral student at the University of Bordeaux, who is attached to the French research institute IFRA, Nairobi, and is studying heritage initiatives by the Nuba community in Kibera slum, Nairobi.

The day began with reflections on the first exchange visit. Stanford Chege, secretary of Lari Memorial Peace Museum, challenged participants to evaluate the best ways of communicating peace between young people and communities, by use of vernacular as well as foreign languages (English). He gave examples of how sport, role play, poetry and dance can be used to promote peace in schools. He also “reminded members of the good knowledge-sharing sessions and meal sharing

at Lari which was an indication that in spite of being born of different ethnic groups we are members of the same human society.”⁶

Akamba Museum was founded and is run by Munuve Mutisya, who described his experience of working under Sultan Somjee’s guidance. “When I worked as Somjee’s research assistant there was a lot of violence in the country in general. Here in Kambaland, there was the Kyanguli Secondary School fire disaster that left 50 students dead. There was also fighting over land, plus family splits and house break-ins. All this led us to start the Akamba Peace Museum.” He drew an analogy between peace making and the traditional cooking pot, that cannot cook without the three stones that make up the hearth. “Together the three stones symbolise unity.” So many everyday items symbolise peace, he said, including fire – “traditionally you either made yours in the morning by rubbing sticks together or you got some embers/burning charcoal from a neighbour.” There were lessons to be learned from cultural aesthetics.

Munuve described the goals of the museum as bringing people together to talk, share, learn and revive traditions of peace, and to initiate and promote peace education in schools. “‘Modern’ lifestyles do not bring elders and youth together; therefore, the youth are not learning about peace and other traditions from elders. The Peace Museum is therefore playing a crucial role here.” He went on to describe his role in developing the beaded peace tree initiative (see above), an idea derived from his Ford Foundation-sponsored visits to the Iroquois community in the United States, which centred around an exchange programme on beading techniques.

The coastal elders gave an entertaining account of their activities to commemorate folk heroine Mekatilili, who led a rebellion against British colonisers in 1913-14. More broadly, MADCA is concerned with what it sees as the erosion of social values due to changes in people’s way of life, and how this can be reversed. Timothy Gachanga then led a discussion on the day’s theme, informing participants that “documentation was started by people with positive thinking about preservation of cultures and cultural materials”. It was important, he said, to preserve cultures not for the sake of storage but for reference by generations to come. In preserving an artefact, one also preserves the language associated with that item. After a session on ‘ways forward’, the day ended

⁶ Minutes taken by Peter Muchero and written up by Njiru Njeru.

as it had begun, with traditional dancing, and with the planting of peace trees. Some participants had to return to Nairobi, leaving everyone else to continue chatting, eating and dancing, before returning home the following day.

The final visit in this series, to Agikuyu Peace Museum, Nyeri, drew fewer participants (twelve). This may have had something to do with the first aim listed below, since this person was both instrumental in developing the peace museums movement, yet ultimately divided it in some ways.

The organisers set out to do the following –

- To have moments with elders and curators of different peace museums following the death of the museum founder (key research informant Kariuki Thuku, who died in tragic circumstances in early 2010);
- To learn some of the challenges the museum faces in managing its affairs;
- To discuss some of the necessary actions to be taken by the peace museums in the era of new Kenyan constitution (passed in a national referendum in August 2010, which enshrines for the first time a wide range of rights to cultural heritage);
- To evaluate the contribution of the exchange visits to the strengths of the peace museums in Kenya.

It was a time for quiet reflection on the legacy left behind by Kariuki, whose father Paul Njembui Thuku (chair of the museum's board) is also a key research informant and ex-Mau Mau fighter, now a devout member of the pacifist Akorino faith group. He expressed the heartfelt opinion that “dissemination of peace knowledge is the only means through which harmony can be restored in Kenya”.

Conclusion

The exchange visits were an unexpected offshoot of research that has involved a wide variety of civil society groups in Kenya, all broadly concerned with cultural heritage. These people include disempowered and marginalised youth and women, and citizens who may be regarded as subaltern, such as former Mau Mau veterans who have not enjoyed the fruits of independence and continue to feel alienated within the nation state. (Poorer ‘Loyalists’ undoubtedly feel much the same way, but do not feel able to say so publicly, for obvious reasons.) Karega-Munene and I had unwittingly become, in the course of our research, mediators moving between groups and community museums that had grown apart for various reasons, e.g. competition for or withdrawal of donor funds, personality differences and ideological rifts. We decided to make use of that position for the purpose of benefiting these heritage stakeholders, and helping to bring about small-scale reconciliation. We are grateful to the British Academy for having the imagination to support us in this. The initiative took on a momentum of its own, that has become regarded as a project in its own right by participants. There is potential, if follow-on funding can be found by the participant groups (our funding has ended), to extend this to wider Kenyan society. The groups also plan to launch a peace newsletter, funds permitting.

As the museum curators concluded after the first visit, “participants observed that through the visits the possibility of realizing national cohesion can be attained”. That is no small ambition. While a plethora of peace-building groups and initiatives has sprung up across Kenya since 2008 - a veritable ‘peace industry’ - we would argue that small grassroots initiatives like these may stand a better chance of achieving something sustainable in the longer term. Such events are more meaningful to ordinary citizens than the large, empty gestures led by politicians for their own political ends – such as President Kibaki’s “tour to cement peace efforts” (21 January 2010) as the guest of Rift Valley MPs who have rebelled against beleaguered prime minister Raila Odinga, some of whom are resisting efforts to prosecute them at the International Criminal Court (ICC) for offences related to the 2007/08 crisis⁷. Such activities have more to do with political scheming in the run-up to the 2012 elections (and the avoidance of ICC prosecution) than they do with national peace making.

⁷ ‘Kibaki tour to cement peace efforts’, *Daily Nation* newspaper, Nairobi, posted online 20 January 2010. ‘What awaits Kibaki in the Rift Valley’, *The Standard Online*, 21 January 2011.

Moreover, the curators who took on responsibility for organising the visits acquired other side benefits such as skills development, which will aid them as individuals as well as help to build NGO and museums' capacity. They developed their organisational and communications skills, learned how to draw up budgets and stick to them, write minutes and report back to Karega and myself (and ultimately to the donor) – all skills that will be useful to them in their future fundraising and other activities. It remains to be seen how funding can be found to take the initiative forward, but it is unlikely to come from the state. However, the imminent devolution of power and resources from central government to 47 new county governments, which the new constitution provides for, may provide opportunities. Otherwise, external donors would be very welcome.

Kenyans are now striving to ensure that the 2007/08 crisis does not happen again. Therefore efforts of this kind are very necessary, especially in the run-up to 2012. We believe historians also have a role to play in countering the ahistorical myths and disinformation that too often divides Kenyans and stokes mistrust. We hope that we have contributed, in our own small way as public historians, working collaboratively and across socio-cultural borders, towards this end.

- The International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague has announced the names of six prominent Kenyans it intends to prosecute for their alleged role in orchestrating the 2007/08 violence. They include some of Kenya's most powerful men: Uhuru Kenyatta (son of first president Jomo Kenyatta), two cabinet ministers (William Ruto and Henry Kosgei), the head of the civil service (Francis Muthaura), the former chief of police (Mohammed Hussein Ali), and a radio journalist (Joshua Sang'). Leading politicians, including vice president Kalonzo Musyoka, are making strenuous efforts to resist the ICC, and are lobbying other African states to support postponement of the case, claiming offenders should be tried in local courts. This has split the coalition government, isolating prime minister Raila Odinga who condemns the move to avoid ICC prosecution.
- For more information on the Community Peace Museums Foundation (CPMF), please contact: Timothy Gachanga, Coordinator, CPMF. E-mail: timgachanga@gmail.com

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Dr Lotte Hughes is an historian of Africa, empire and postcolonial issues, who specialises on Kenya. My doctorate in Modern History at St Antony's College, University of Oxford (2002), focused on Maasai land alienation, forced migration and resistance in colonial British East Africa, and was published in a shorter revised version as *Moving the Maasai: A Colonial Misadventure* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). I am currently Lecturer in African Arts and Cultures at the Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies, and also a member of the History Department, Faculty of Arts, The Open University.

My current research interests centre on heritage, memory and identity in contemporary Kenya. I am Principle Investigator of the AHRC-funded research project 'Managing Heritage, Building Peace: Museums, memorialisation and the uses of memory in Kenya' (2008-11). Other key publications include *Environment and Empire*, co-authored with Willam Beinart (Oxford University Press, 2007). Forthcoming research outputs include the journal article "'Truth be Told": Some problems with historical revisionism in Kenya' in a Special Issue of *African Studies* (July 2011) on Heritage, History and Memory: New research from East and southern Africa, which I am guest editing.

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