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# Museums in Kenya: Spaces for Selecting, Ordering and Erasing Memories of Identity and Nationhood

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*This article discusses representations of 'nationhood' at National Museums of Kenya (NMK) and community peace museums (CPMs). The representations range from a virtual absence of exhibitions on nationhood to exhibitions of cultural objects associated with specific ethnic groups and commemoration of local and/or national heroes. The representations at NMK appear to be informed by the expressed and/or assumed wishes of the country's political leadership. As such, the social memory they evoke has suffered episodic interruptions through time. On the other hand, representations at CPMs are, to a large extent, informed by influential individuals or small sections of the community and 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 come to the fore with every general election since the re-introduction of multi-party politics 20 years ago and, in particular, with the 2007/08 post-election violence.*

**Key words:** museums, heritage, mnemonics, social memory, nationhood, Kenya

According to Kenya's National Museums and Heritage Act of 2006, 'museum' is 'a public or private institution which collects, preserves, analyses and exhibits objects of cultural and natural heritage' (Republic of Kenya 2006:section 2). Although the Act specifically deals with the publicly-funded National Museums of Kenya (NMK), it also provides, albeit grudgingly, for registration of 'private museums'.<sup>1</sup> Although the registration of private museums envisioned in the Act is yet to be enforced, there exist two other categories of museums in the country: community peace museums (CPMs) and private museums. Both of these are small outfits located in rural areas or in small urban centres. As their name suggests, private museums, which are outside the scope of this article, are privately owned, the largest of these in the area of study being Thunguma Museum, Nyeri. The rest of the privately-owned museums, holding small collections of ethnographic objects and memorabilia are operated by retired teachers, ex-Mau Mau fighters and enthusiasts of African cultures in their homes. CPMs, on the other hand, are registered as community-based organisations and are, therefore, located within given communities, where they operate on shoestring budgets. As such, they are dependent on the unpaid time and labour of curators, committees or boards of local elders and enthusiasts of African cultures from the community within which they are located. Unlike CPMs which are of recent origin, NMK's

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history spans a century.<sup>2</sup> As such, it is a better established institution with a wider reach; it is also better staffed, equipped and funded (by the national treasury and through donor funds) and curates large ethnographic and other collections.

This article discusses representations of 'nationhood' in NMK and CPMs' exhibits. As we shall learn presently, the representations range from the virtual absence of exhibits on nationhood in some of the museums to exhibits of cultural objects associated with specific ethnic groups and commemoration 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 come to the fore with every general election since the re-introduction of multi-party politics in 1991 and, in particular, with the 2007/08 post-election violence (Republic of Kenya 2008).

### **Meanings of Heritage**

Although both NMK and CPMs deal with important aspects of Kenya's heritage, the meaning they attach to the term heritage is quite varied. According to the National Museums and Heritage Act, which describes NMK as the custodian of Kenya's cultural and natural heritage, cultural heritage is defined as comprising:

- (a) monuments;
- (b) architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of universal value from the point of view of history, art or science;
- (c) groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding value from the point of view of history, art or science;
- (d) works of humanity or the combined works of nature and humanity, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view; and includes objects of archaeological or palaeontological interest, objects of historical interest and protected areas. (Republic of Kenya 2006:section 2)

Further, the Act defines natural heritage as including:

- (a) natural features consisting of physical and biological formations or groups of such formations, which are of outstanding universal value from the aesthetic or scientific point of view;

- (b) geological or physiographical formations of special significance, rarity or beauty;
- (c) precisely delineated areas which constitute the habitat of threatened species of animals and plants of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty; or
- (d) areas which are or have been of religious significance, use or veneration and which include but are not limited to Kayas [i.e. sacred forests of the coastal Mijikenda ethnic groups]. (Republic of Kenya 2006:section 2)

Thus, the legal definitions begin and end with objects, monuments or physical structures and spaces/sites. This is hardly surprising granted the history of research at NMK. Although from its foundation in 1910 the nucleus museum focused on natural history, archaeological, palaeontological and geological researches gained in importance after the construction of the Coryndon Memorial Museum.<sup>3</sup> Since then, NMK has been an important player in archaeological and palaeontological researches. The definitions are also influenced by previous legislation on the management of Kenya's antiquities (Republic of Kenya 1984a) and definitions of NMK's *modus operandi* (Republic of Kenya 1984b), both of which focused on antiquities, monuments, plus archaeological, palaeontological and geological phenomena.

Right from the start, the academic subject of history has not been of significance to NMK. Indeed, except for Bethwell Ogot (2003) who worked as director of The International Louis Leakey Memorial Institute for African Prehistory (TILLMIAP), which only operated for a few years, NMK is yet to employ a professional historian. Consequently, it has lacked the internal dynamics that would have facilitated the establishment of a gallery addressing colonial and postcolonial history, hence issues of nationhood. Interestingly, Ogot did not recruit a professional historian to work for TILLMIAP, leave alone influence the employment of one by NMK or the establishment of a history gallery. That was probably because he served in that capacity for a short stint and in acrimonious circumstances, arising from his attempts to divorce TILLMIAP from the museum and to oust Richard Leakey from the museum's directorship (Morell 1995; also see Ogot 2003).

Unlike NMK, CPMs have very broad views of what heritage entails (see Child 2009). Although it is unclear whether this is due to influence from UNESCO's definitions,<sup>4</sup> CPMs heritage includes both tangible and intangible heritage. Data gathered from curators of the museums at public forums<sup>5</sup> inform that 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, biological and physical environment, spaces/sites of memory, oral traditions, performing arts, social and cultural practices, festive events, and the 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’.<sup>6</sup> 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’.<sup>7</sup> For CPMs, all of these are essential in fostering peaceful coexistence within and between communities in Kenya.

The discussions that follow will focus on four museums falling under NMK: Nairobi National Museum, Meru Museum, Kariandusi Site Museum and Hyrax Hill Site Museum; plus three CPMs: Aembu Peace Museum, Agikuyu Peace Museum and Lari Memorial Peace Museum. These museums were chosen because they are within a radius of 200 kilometres or less of Nairobi National Museum, which is NMK’s flagship and also the largest museum in the country.

### **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 museums 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 these exhibited objects are replicas.

The recently revamped Nairobi National Museum consists of Birds of East Africa, Great Hall of Mammals, Contemporary Art, Hall of Kenya, Cradle of Humankind and History of Nairobi National Museum Galleries on the ground floor, plus continuation of the Hall of Kenya and Cycles of Life Galleries on the upper floor, and a History of Kenya Gallery, which was only opened in November 2010 (see Hughes 2011, this Special Issue). The Birds of East Africa and the Great Mammals Galleries exhibit a wide range of stuffed bird species and mammals, respectively, while the Contemporary Art Gallery provides an avenue for local artists to exhibit and sell their works to visitors. The rest of the galleries are likely to provide some evidence of expression of identities and/or nationhood or to serve as spaces for selective ordering or erasing social memory.

The Hall of Kenya exhibits the country’s heritage, with sample representations of nature, culture and history. Among the photographs displayed, only one on the ground floor is captioned. It is notable that the exhibit includes two paintings of individuals from the Otuho and Dinka ethnic groups of Southern Sudan and that the Maasai feature twice in the Hall and also feature prominently in the Cycles

of Life Gallery. A large number of Kenyan ethnic groups do not feature at all in these spaces. The predominance of the Maasai in the exhibits is intended to cater for the tourist market, which is important for income generation to NMK and other museums elsewhere (Boniface and Fowler 1993; Munjeri 1992; Musonda 1992). This fact is underscored by the US\$100 entrance fee NMK charges foreign tourists to view the original hominid skeletal remains in the Cradle of Humankind Gallery's secured section.

The text accompanying the human ancestor exhibit, in that part of the latter Gallery open to all visitors, does not give names of the researchers whose projects provided funding for field research, hence enabling discovery of the fossils, nor of those who studied and described the fossils. Yet, without the researchers and, in particular, the Leakey family, the fossils would have remained unknown to NMK and to the rest of the world. Equally significant is the exhibition of the unlabelled Louis SB Leakey statue in the History of Nairobi National Museum Gallery. The statue appears to be holding something in both hands – which was originally a handaxe – but there is nothing to hold. These acts of omission represent attempts to erase the identity and memory of the Leakey family from studies of human origins and evolution, a trend that gained momentum in the late 1990s with the unprecedented politicisation of NMK's chief executive's office.

The Cycle of Life exhibit consists of artefacts associated with key stages of life in traditional and modern Kenya. In virtually all cases, the artefacts are attributed to specific ethnic groups, thus begging the question of their Kenyan-ness. This is the case not only at the Nairobi National Museum, but also at the 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 headquarters in Nairobi. Besides the in situ exhibit of Acheulian handaxes dating to about 0.7 to 1 million years ago (Gowlett and Crompton 1994), Kariandusi Museum, for instance, houses exhibits on human ancestors and handaxes in a single room. The exhibit includes casts of hominids, photocopies of illustrations of the 3.6 million-year-old hominid footprints found at Laetoli in Tanzania (Johanson and Edey 1981) and of the skeletal remains of *Homo erectus*, popularly known as Turkana/Nariokotome Boy (Walker and Leakey 1993). 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 period, which may explain why the local population does not visit the museum.

Although Hyrax Hill is also an archaeological site museum, its exhibits are somewhat varied. One of its three small rooms contains an exhibit of material culture of the inhabitants of the hitherto Rift Valley Province whose ethnic identities are presented on a map of Kenya.<sup>8</sup> The Samburu, Gusii and Luhya, who make up a

sizeable portion of the province's population, don't feature on the map. Exclusion of the Samburu is certainly an oversight because the exhibit includes examples of their material culture. There is no doubt that efforts have been made to exhibit objects from the communities found in the defunct province, except for the curious inclusion of artefacts from the Mbeere<sup>9</sup> who live to the east of Mount Kenya. 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. Exhibits in the other two rooms are all archaeological, including for example, material recovered from Neolithic and Iron Age sites located around the hill.

Meru Museum is relatively larger than Kariandusi and Hyrax Hill Museums. It consists of two rooms, one of which is unofficially known to the staff as the Culture Gallery. This is where one would expect to learn about identities, nationhood and the history of Kenya. However, 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 range from a diorama of a Meru elder, woman and boy to artefacts associated with bee-keeping, tools and weapons, and artefacts associated with rites of passage. There are also old black-and-white photographs depicting Meru, Tigania and Tharaka dancers and Chuka drummers.<sup>10</sup>

At the centre of the Gallery is a wooden carving of Mugwe, the mythical ancestor of the Meru, by local artist Francis M M' Amundi. A plaque carries this brief text:

THE LIVING MUGWE  
'AROUND HIM, ALL THE MERU  
ASSEMBLE. FOR HIM THEY WORK  
AND HIM THEY PROTECT'

The visitor cannot appreciate or understand the carving without explanations from a guide. The guides have impressive knowledge of the mythical Mugwe and his foundation of the Meru. But apart from the narrative the guides provide, Meru identity is not explored further in the exhibit.

Curiously, the Prehistory Gallery also exhibits 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 from the Meru, which raises 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, Kikuyu/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 space 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.

Besides the contemporary photographs, the Prehistory Gallery exhibit includes archaeological artefacts and casts of hominid skulls, plus a cast of the Laetoli hominid footprints. Also included is an evolution chart which contains incorrect information about hominids, thus illustrating the dated nature of some exhibits in the regional museums.

No doubt, the elaborate and extensive exhibit on human evolution (on two walls of the Prehistory Gallery) is, as is also evident at Nairobi National, Kariandusi and Hyrax Hill Museums, a strong statement about NMK's contribution to science. In addition, it is worth noting that concentration on human and cultural evolution, hence the emphasis on archaeological and palaeontological material is also safe politically. Whereas interpretation of human evolution is remotely related to the politics of the day, the more recent archaeological periods are contested (see for example Ambrose 1982; Bower 1991; Collett and Robertshaw 1983; Dale 2007; Karega-Munene 1996, 2002; Kusimba 1999; Prendergast 2008; Robertshaw 1991; 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 this author was working for NMK, he overheard the 'curator'<sup>11</sup> 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**

Unlike NMK, CPMs do not exhibit stuffed animals, archaeological artefacts, or palaeontological fossils. They 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 exhibited 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.<sup>12</sup>

[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.<sup>13</sup>

Exhibits at Aembu Peace Museum consist of gourds, calabashes, pottery, traditional stools, flywhisks, traditional dress, drinking vessels, tools and implements. Also included are paintings of sacred sites, trees, Embu beadwork, Dr Sultan Somjee (former head of NMK's Ethnography Department), and the council of elders associated with the museum; plus a photograph and painting of Njuri-Ncheke, the Meru Council of Elders. 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.<sup>14</sup> Unlike at Lari, the museum does not have a massacre to commemorate. But this community also boasts of Mau Mau heroes like General Kubu Kubu who, interestingly, is not commemorated in the museum, but 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 were underground Mau Mau operatives.

The Agikuyu Peace Museum exhibit has seven sections: *Gĩthaka* (Land), *Ūthaka* (Beauty), Songs and Dance, *Kĩama* (Council of Elders), Peace and Art, Peace and Work, and Mau Mau and Colonisation (sic). Except for the last section, the exhibits include a reasonably wide range of ethnographic objects, ranging from containers for food, honey, water and mead to drinking vessels, farming implements, ornaments and musical instruments. The material in the Mau Mau section includes 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] – 25<sup>th</sup> 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 national hero.

Exhibits at Lari Memorial Peace Museum (which is housed in two rented rooms at Kimende, a small town to the west of Nairobi), 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 to which we shall be returning.

Besides exhibiting material culture, Agikuyu and Aembu Peace Museums have an important outdoor section known as 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.<sup>15</sup>

## **Museums and Nationhood**

As we have noted above, the recently revamped Nairobi National Museum, the three regional museums (Hyrax Hill Museum, Kariandusi Museum and Meru Museum), and the three CPMs, do not have exhibits that really address nationhood in a serious manner. Exhibits of this nature are absent from regional museums. 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 as a natural history museum and official policy articulated a few years after independence stating natural history was the ‘principal activity of the museum’;<sup>16</sup> 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 Atieno Odhiambo 2003).<sup>17</sup> 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 Kenyan-ness. Kenyans continued to bask in 'the bliss of amnesia', to borrow Huyssen's words (2003:10). It is against this background that NMK's perspectives on the historic past appear to have been formed (Karega-Munene 2009).

According to the then NMK director/chief executive, Kenyatta's orchestration of historical amnesia did not influence NMK's exhibit policy. 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. Firstly, its 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 pre-history, 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'.<sup>18</sup>

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 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, leaving office only in 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:

And in that regard, Dr. [Maina] Kagombe [then Director of Kenya] National Archives was pushing very hard for the National Archives to develop political and social history [exhibits] around the central archives in the [old Gridlays Bank] building ... [It was thought the building which was located in Nairobi's Central Business District] would form a monument to the colonial struggle.<sup>19</sup>

But that was not to be, for the National Archives faced difficulties in getting 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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'.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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 arap 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.<sup>23</sup>

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 10<sup>th</sup> Independence Anniversary. What is clear though is that, until very recently (see Hughes 2011, this Special Issue), NMK did not seriously contemplate or plan for an exhibit of Kenya's history. Sensitivity surrounding the struggle for independence, which was appropriately symbolised 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 (see for example, Atieno Odhiambo and Lonsdale 2003; Branch 2009; Clough 1998; Edgerton 1989; Kinyatti 2009a and b; Maughan-Brown 1985; Ochieng' 2002; 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'.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

Although the Asian African exhibit touched on thorny subjects like the struggle for independence and assassination of Pio Gama Pinto in February 1965 (Odinga 1967:287), NMK enthusiastically embraced it.<sup>26</sup> 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. Some of the peace-making and peace-building approaches captured in the exhibit are described elsewhere (Somjee 1997).

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 2007/08 post-election violence, an issue we shall be returning to presently. First, let us discuss the narratives rendered through their exhibits.

The scantiness and/or absence of text exhibits at CPMs 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, killing 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, killing of men, women and children and confiscation of property. Inevitably, the massacres sharply divided the Lari community into Mau Mau and Home Guards, a polarisation that continued into independent Kenya. The need to bring the two camps together is largely the *raison d'être* 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.<sup>27</sup> 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 *nyūngū* 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 to (a) 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) 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 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 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 it shied 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 until recently 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 (see for example, 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 Kenyanhood experienced during periods of national distress like the August 1998 bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi and the 2007/08 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 leads to addressing national issues.

The new constitution's decentralisation plank may give a new lease of life to CPMs, given museums will now be a responsibility of county governments, rather than of the central government (Republic of Kenya 2006, 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.

### **Note on Contributor**

**Karega-Munene** teaches anthropology and history at the United States International University, Nairobi. Prof Karega-Munene trained as an archaeologist (Universities of Nairobi and Cambridge, 1983–93) and was employed by NMK for nine years, including head of what was then the Archaeology Division. His research interests include human rights in relation to museums, dress and identity, and the construction and deconstruction of Kenyan ethnic identities. He is lead consultant on the project 'Managing Heritage, Building Peace'. He wishes to thank the curators of Meru, Kariandusi and Hyrax Hill Museums and CPMs for their time and for sharing their wealth of information, staff of NMK archives for efficient retrieval of documents, Richard Leakey for granting an invaluable interview, and F.K. Iraki and Irene Kagure for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

### **Notes**

1. The bill that became the Act was drafted by NMK with the assistance of a private law firm and the Attorney General's office. Preparation of the bill was a component of the turn of the century's European Union funded restructuring process. As conceived by NMK, the bill prohibited use of the word 'museum' except by NMK, which explains why the Act does not provide for appeal where a non-state museum is denied registration. This author then headed NMK Division of Archaeology and witnessed the unfolding of these events.
2. NMK is established under the National Museums and Heritage Act, 2006. It is responsible for managing all state-owned museums, sites, and monuments located in different parts of Kenya. Also under NMK is the Institute of Primate Research that conducts primate ecology and biomedical researches. Besides mounting exhibits and displays for public viewing, NMK is responsible for conducting research in various academic disciplines (see <http://www.museums.or.ke/content/blogcategory/44/83/>).
3. The Coryndon Memorial Museum was renamed National Museum in 1964 (MTK 1963/64). Subsequently, the museum was renamed Nairobi Museum and more recently Nairobi National Museum. It is not clear when the *s* in 'National Museums of Kenya' was added.
4. UNESCO website <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00002> (accessed 21 July 2010).

5. These included three visits by CPMs' curators to Lari, Akamba and Agikuyu Museums sponsored by a British Academy award to Lotte Hughes and this author. Other forums are Teachers' Workshops run by Lari Memorial Peace Museum, and peace education in primary and secondary schools conducted by Waihenya Njoroge and Njiru Njeru, curators of Lari Memorial Peace Museum and Aembu Peace Museum, respectively.
6. UNESCO website <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00002> (accessed 21 July 2010).
7. Ibid.
8. Rift Valley was one of eight administrative provinces into which Kenya was divided. The new constitution divides Kenya into 47 counties, thus abolishing the provinces (Republic of Kenya 2010).
9. Until fairly recently, the Mbeere belonged to the Embu ethnic group. According to Embu informants, the present Mbeere identity is a consequence of deconstruction of the Embu ethnic group by a family that has dominated the area's politics since the 1950s (Karega-Munene 2010). This author was privy to the exhibit script; it did not include Mbeere artefacts.
10. As with the Embu, the Meru ethnic group has in the recent past been deconstructed into the Meru, Tigania, Chuka and Tharaka identities reflected in the photographic exhibit. It is unclear whether the choice of photographs was made by the exhibit's scriptwriter or by the technicians who built the exhibit.
11. 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.
12. Timothy Gachanga, curator of the Akorino Peace Museum, during curators' visit to Akamba Peace Museum, 6 February 2010.
13. Waihenya Njoroge, curator of Lari Memorial Peace Museum, during curators' visit to Lari, 12 September 2009.
14. The mud- and-thatch Aembu Peace Museum was broken into in February 2009, resulting in loss of objects. Since March 2009 the remaining objects have been in storage as a new brick and mortar museum is constructed. It is expected the building will be ready for occupation by June 2011.
15. Munuve Mutisya, curator of Akamba Peace Museum, during curators' visit to his museum, 6 February 2010.
16. Memorandum on 'The status and functions of the national museums' by RH Carcasson, director of the National Museum, 16 January 1966, NMK Archives.
17. Similar sentiments were echoed recently by the Taskforce on National Heroes and Heroines in an unpublished report titled 'Report of the taskforce for country-wide data collection on criteria and modalities of honouring national heroes and heroines', which reasoned that 'all communities [i.e., ethnic groups] took part in Mau Mau activities in different ways. Some were in the forest fighting while others were manufacturing guns for the fighters. There were also people and communities who gave refuge to the Mau Mau leaders' (TNHH unpublished:12).
18. Richard Leakey, interviewed at Nairobi, 3 August 2010.
19. Leakey, *ibid.*
20. Leakey, *ibid.*
21. Leakey, *ibid.* Whereas President Jomo Kenyatta distanced himself from Mau Mau and urged Kenyans to forget the past, he was not averse to entertainment by ex-Mau Mau. This author recalls witnessing dramatised enactments of Mau Mau struggles as part of the entertainment for the president and his entourage at State House, Nakuru, and at some public rallies in present-day Nakuru county.
22. *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).

23. Richard Leakey, interviewed at Nairobi, 3 August 2010.
24. These were designed and developed by Somjee who graciously invited this author to their previews.
25. 'The Asian African Heritage, Identity & History: A Photo Exhibition' organised by NMK and the Asian African Heritage Trust, anonymous (n.d.).
26. 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.
27. Waihenya Njoroge, remarks during tour of Lari Memorial Peace Museum exhibit, 13 October 2010.

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