

Exhibiting Identities at the National Museums of Kenya

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In post-colonial Kenya it has been mainly the stage and not exhibitions that represented reconstruction of social identities due to the damage done to the image of Africa. Plays such as *Luanda Magere* and *Wangu was Makeri* are about reclaiming a suppressed social identity while others such as *Ngahika Ndenda* and *Maitu Njugira* in ethnic languages, and *Mekatilili* in Kiswahili, present alternative views of the stereotypical and naïve native of the colonies. At the University of Nairobi and later at Kenyatta University, changing perspectives in African Studies, History, Literature, Visual Arts and Anthropology led to dramatic developments in how African past and culture were perceived. These developments, however, did not affect ethnographic displays at the National Museums of Kenya until much later.

In 1997 and the year 2000, the National Museums of Kenya mounted two major exhibitions on social identities. The 1997 exhibition comprised of some 200 artefacts from eight ethnic groups of Kenya representing events in their histories reflecting on indigenous peace making traditions and how these societies presented their identities at negotiations rituals following conflicts. The second exhibition on the Asian African Heritage is on going and tells the story of the last hundred years of migration, work and settlement of people from the Indian sub-continent to East Africa. The first exhibition was researched and prepared by the Division of Ethnography of the National Museums of Kenya at the time of intense 'ethnic clashes' in the Rift Valley, Western, Coast and Northern Provinces of Kenya. Images of Rwanda were powerful influences in perceptions of Africans and especially East Africans. All the ethnic groups namely the Maasai, Borana, Pokot, Rendille, Turkana, Saboat, Tugen and Somali, whose peace material culture and traditions were represented at the Exhibition, were involved in ethnic clashes. The exhibition on the Asian African Heritage is staged at the time of growing social insecurity and tension among Asian Africans, a people of Asian descent to whom Africa has been their home over several generations.

What is common in the creation of the two exhibitions is the representations of social histories and identities of people who are often considered outside the mainstream. These are of pastoralists of Cushitic and Nilotic stock, and Asian Africans. Both the exhibitions contest the popular and mainstream media images of the other. The ethnic people are often thought of and even portrayed as 'warriors' implying primitivity and hence prone to violence. The causes of the ethnic clashes of the nineties have often been pointed to the backwardness of the pastoralist cultures. The Asian Africans are also often thought of and portrayed in terms of stereotypes of corrupt businessmen whose history and traditions are antagonistic to the development, morality and future of this nation. Hence there is an implicit suggestion to tribalism in viewing the one and of racism in viewing the other. The second common feature of the two exhibitions is that both were researched and setup by the Division of Ethnography while also working closely with the communities whose traditions were to be on public display. There have been parallel approaches to exhibiting identities in overseas countries as well.

During the last decades of the twentieth century, Museum ethnographic displays in Europe and America have taken new dimensions responding to challenges of racism and multiculturalism. The history of Museums, especially the history of exhibiting cultures, has passed through phases reflecting the development and changes in human thought and society. This is a natural evolution. We have lived through the phase when the colonial exhibit was the dominating image both at home and abroad. It was the display of the other, exhibited as it was seen from the vantage view of the one at the top.

Today in African ethnography, new schemes and diorama of displays are explored and the conscientious curators seek partnerships with the ethnic, immigrant, refugee and racial minorities in representations of their cultures. People's images affect their social status and hence also their civic identities as Americans, Canadians, British and Germans among many others. In North America, for example the first nations and African Americans have been involved in creating exhibitions describing their cultures to the American mainstream at national institutions such as the Smithsonian and Museum of

African Art. These exhibitions show both modern art and ethnographic material. It is now getting more accepted that cultural exhibitions are products of social processes and they reflect changing attitudes and formations of societies and nations at specific historical stages.

African museums play a crucial role in educating the public about African identities in this age of respecting cultural diversities and making of democracies. What is of concern for the African curator is to show the status of ethnic cultures as well as their social and civic identities as important features of their lifestyles. For this to realize the curator needs to work consciously and deliberately to invite the 'others' of the nation to the display forum and support them in representing themselves from their own perspectives using the various embedded and private resources such as clan and family artefacts, documents and photographs for public viewing. Through this their social identities are explored and acknowledged at the national level and most importantly the communities have an opportunity to say who they are and where are they coming from thus asserting the composition of our pluralist society.

In East Africa, for example, we have witnessed how communities began to explore their social identities as a result of growing political awareness. Among the Agikuyu of Central Province in Kenya, there was the Agikuyu Cultural Association formed in 1928 which first led to the writing of *An African speaks for his people* by Parmenas Githendu Mockerie (1934) and then *Facing Mt Kenya* by Jomo Kenyatta (1938). These writings brought about an awareness that guided the first English-literate nationalists to acquire ethnic and later national histories from their own perspectives versus the European perspective. In 1934 Parmenas Githendu Mockerie was probably the first African nationalist from East Africa to publish a text in English on ethnic history and customs. He belonged to the Kikuyu Folklore Society that, as early as in 1928, was attempting to define the culture and identity of the Agikuyu. Later during the first two decades of independence, Kenyan historians wrote about ethnic customs, beliefs, origins and histories. These historians included Bethwell Ogot, Godfrey Muriuki, Gideon Were and William Ochieng, all of whom rank among the first African academics and professors.

Such is also the experience of people of African descent in the Diaspora. The most significant example of the African American experience relates to the formation of their social identity in the U.S.A., which projected on to and paralleled the Civil Rights Movement. This movement was in demand for an equal civic identity. Changing civic identities often shape the sense of social identity as revealed by histories of the colonized world and her people in the Diaspora.

The colonial administration and transformation of East Africa into new politically defined countries consequently affected definitions of social identities of several peoples as well. Some like the Kamasia, Suk and Elgon Maasai rejected their government-designated names defining their identities, and claimed separate identities as Tugen, Pokot and Sabaot while the collective Kalenjin identity was a formation of the colonial period itself. On the other hand in 1997 and more than thirty years after independence, that the Abasuba, a Bantu group living within the dominant Nilotic culture, claimed its distinct heritage and regional identity. And in 1998 the fourth and fifth generations of Nubians, descendents of soldiers from the dismantled British army, voiced their concern over lack of acknowledgement of their social identity. The issue of social identity is also of political significance in Kenya because ethnic and sub-ethnic lands correlate with administrative boundaries as districts and sub districts, and, ultimately, as political constituencies determining parliamentary seats. This is a legacy of governance from the time of British rule when ethnicity was institutionalized and compartmentalized, and chiefs instituted for each ethnic region to facilitate administration. Post independence experience shows strengthening of this rigid colonial administrative facility.

What is now emerging in the Museum's ethnographic exhibitions is the public viewing of the social histories of Africa in the formation of postcolonial civil society, and especially now, during the post one party state, so that the multiple histories in the making of East Africa's composite society, independent of state influence, can be viewed through the prism of its many patterns of colour.

Historically speaking, the phases of stage and museum performances are situations in tensions and transitions, between traditions and modernity, ethnic spirituality and new religious practices, civil societies and styles of governance. However, what is of significance is not how different the ethnic people are to each other in terms of customs, languages and beliefs, that map us out as 40 odd exclusive societies, each perceived as closed unit unable to integrate and consequently form one non-tribal fellowship of citizens, but how and when social identities of the diverse and distinct peoples of Eastern Africa become complementary to one other in the evolution of a pluralist civil society. In that we have to know first where we are coming from, as a people, and as a nation of people whose ancestors walked down the Nile, and from the Red Sea; from West Africa, and those who sailed the Ocean harnessing the Trade Winds to come to the East African coast,

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(Published by *Horizon, Journal of National Museums of Kenya*. May, 2000, Nairobi)