

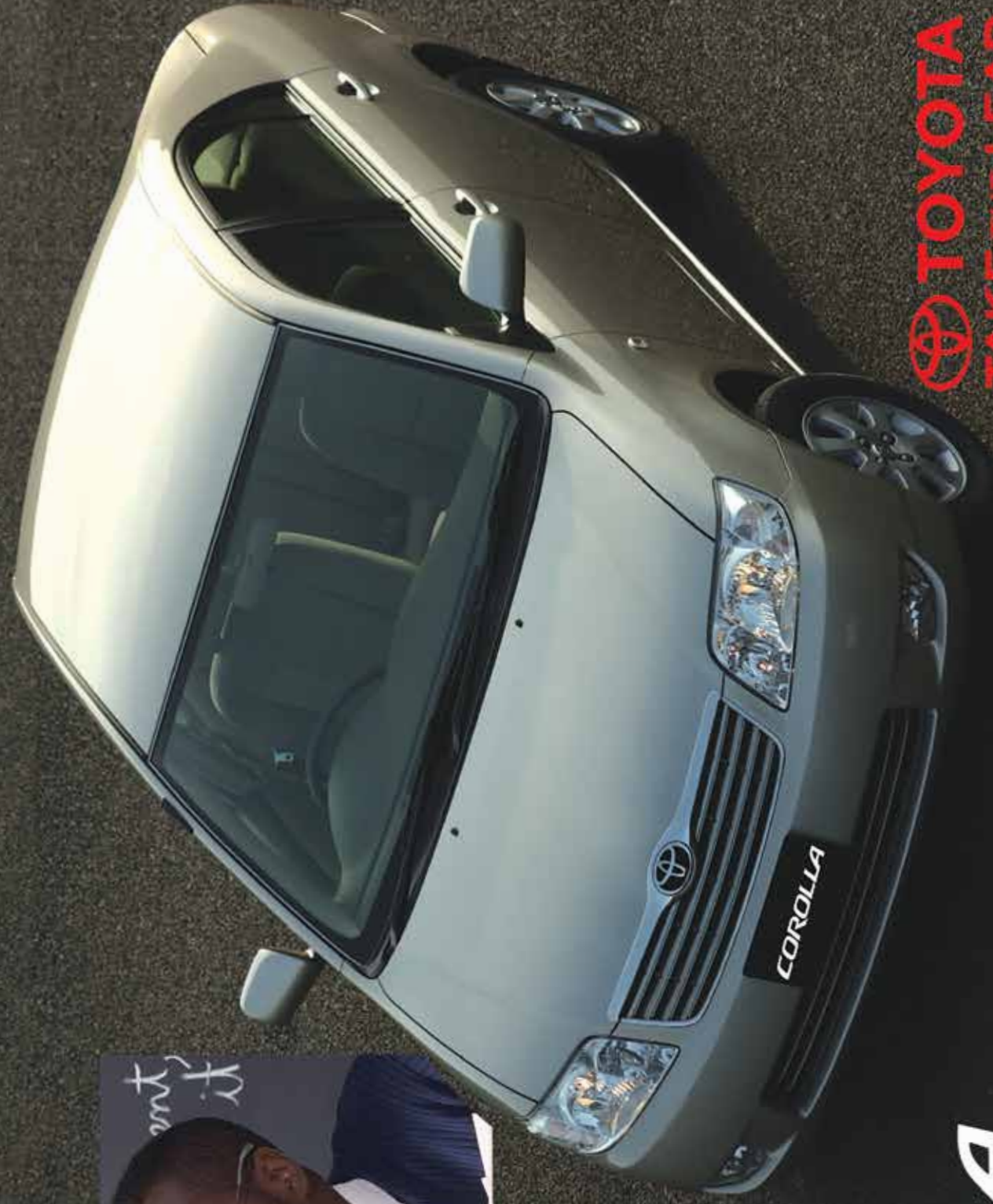
# Kenya Past and Present



Issue 35



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# Kenya Past and Present

Issue 35, 2005

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### FRONT COVER:

Azande pot from southwestern Sudan, early 20th century.  
From the collection of the British Museum, brought to  
Kenya for the Hazina exhibition in the Nairobi Gallery.  
Photo by British Museum.

### Erratum:

In issue 34 of KP&P, the following paragraph in the article *How many wildebeest do you need?* failed to print in its entirety. We apologise to Dr Mike Norton-Griffiths for the error and take the opportunity to reprint it here.

*"The sheer incompetence of the state conservation monopoly has already been alluded to – losing 50% of the resource under its tutelage over the last 25 years. Very recently, its sheer impotence has been demonstrated by the spearing to death of most, if not all, of the remaining lions from Nairobi National Park right outside KWS headquarters where some 500 bureaucrats sat in total paralysis."*



## KENYA MUSEUM SOCIETY

The Kenya Museum Society is a non-profit-making organisation dedicated to assisting the National Museums of Kenya. You are invited to join the Society and receive a subscription to *Kenya Past and Present*. Privileges to members include free entrance to all museums, regional museums, prehistoric sites and monuments under the jurisdiction of the National Museums of Kenya. In addition, local members receive a monthly newsletter about society activities: lectures, slide-shows, films, birdwalks, nature hikes, weekend field trips and visits to places of interest. The Society runs the bookshops at the Snake Park, Nairobi Gallery and Karen Blixen Museums. It organises two major public events annually—the Arts Festival, which aims to promote East African art and artists, and the Know Kenya Course, an informal learning programme popular with expatriates, longtime residents and those involved in the travel and tourism industry.

### Membership Rates

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Annual Membership expires one year from date of payment.

To join KMS, send name (and those of children under 18 years of age to be included in a family membership), postal address and telephone number with a cheque for the appropriate membership category to: Kenya Museum Society, PO Box 40658, Nairobi 00100, Kenya.

For further information please telephone the Society's office: 3750136 or 3743808, or 3742131/-4 ext. 289. Mobile: 0724-255299.

E-mail: [info@KenyaMuseumSociety.org](mailto:info@KenyaMuseumSociety.org)

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Saryoo Shah, Chairperson of KMS,  
reports on

# Kenya Museum Society



Chairperson Saryoo Shah welcomes participants to the Know Kenya Course.



KMS volunteers at the registration desk of the Know Kenya Course.



The director's courtyard with paintings on display during the Arts Festival.

“There is no hurry in Africa”, as the saying goes. And that seems to be true of my association with the Kenya Museum Society. I started off as a volunteer guide in 1990 and took up the position of 1st Vice Chairperson only in 2004. Just a few months after that, in October 2004 I found myself in the chair after the resignation of the then Chairperson Rhodia Mann.

At that time we were busy organising the annual Know Kenya Course, a major fundraiser for the Society. Marla Stone and Joanna McWilliam were coordinators and both did an excellent job. We had 29 fulltime participants and 15 volunteers, with Safaricom sponsoring the event for the fourth year in a row. Despite the smaller number of fulltime participants, the event generated a larger income than the one organised in 2003. I would like to extend my thanks to all the speakers who made the course so very interesting and also to the volunteers who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make it a success.

I would like to acknowledge Dr Farah, the Director General of the National Museums of Kenya, for all the support that the Nairobi Museum has extended to us. Also, I would personally like to thank Dr Mungai of



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# in 2004-5

Entomology, Joseph Gathua and his team of the Ichthyology Department, and Fredrick Kyalo, Mary Muungu and Julia Awuor of the Palaeontology Department.

One of the sessions within the Know Kenya Course involves a 'behind the scenes' visit to the many departments of the Museum. A visit to the Ichthyology Department made us realise how very crucial it was to preserve the coelacanth specimen that was housed there. This fossil fish is a rare species that was thought to have become extinct about 80 million years ago. The specimen that they have in Ichthyology is a female that was caught off Malindi in April 2001, after which it was exhibited at the Mombasa Agricultural Show. The then President Daniel Arap Moi saw the fish and suggested that, as part of the national heritage of Kenya, it should be handed over to the Ichthyology Department of the National Museums of Kenya for preservation.

The Kenya Museum Society took over the cause and started raising funds for its preservation at the end of November. We obtained donations of leather gloves from Insteel Ltd, masking tapes from Cartridge Office Supplies and styropor from Divikas Enterprises. The Kenya Museum Society gave

KMS volunteers check catalogue entries in preparation for the Arts Festival.



a KSh 100,000 grant for the purchase of a part of the alcohol, while the rest was to be bought by the National Museums of Kenya. Syngenta E.A. Ltd. also donated KSh 35,000 towards the preservation of the fish. On 31 March 2005, I witnessed with satisfaction and a sense of achievement on behalf of the Society the pouring of 1400 litres of alcohol in the tank of the coelacanth.

The annual Arts Festival took place in March 2004 and was a success thanks to a very capable organising team. The event opened on 26 March 2004 with a Gala Night, after which art work was exhibited for two weeks. The event raised KSh 194,678.

During the course of the year, we had several activities organised by my colleagues in the Council and I would like to take the opportunity to thank them for their efforts. I would also like to extend my gratitude to all the volunteers and members of the Society who have in one way or the other helped out at all our events. Some of the activities organised were:

**Weekend outings:** Coordinated by Alexandra Hendriok, the safaris this year had many participants and were a success. Some of the trips included a visit to the Aberdare National Park (Fishing Lodge), Gatamaiyu Forest, Mountain Lodge, Hell's Gate and Mpala Wildlife Sanctuary. The last one was the most successful.

**Evening programmes:** Efficiently organised by Joanna McWilliam, these included a lecture by John Sibi Okumu, who spoke on "The Changing Social and Cultural



The Arts Festival opening gala is an occasion to meet with friends as well as to view and buy artwork.

Perspective in Modern Kenyan Society". Other speakers were Fiametta Rocco, David Coulson, Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, among others. Angela Fisher's lecture had the largest attendance of the year.

**Second hand book sales:** Organised by Lucy Njeri who works for the Society, this took place between 4 and 6 June and raised KSh 57,040. Many thanks to all members who donated books for the event.

**Communication through Culture weekend:**

The Kenya Museum Society was the liaison between Safaricom and the Ethnography Department of the National Museums of Kenya for this weekend that was held at the Ngong Racecourse. Sponsored by Safaricom, nine of Kenya's minority tribes—the Rendille, Njemps, Tharaka, Okiek, Bajun, Kasigau, Dasenach, Suk and Yakuu—exhibited their material culture, in most cases for the first time.

In ending my report for 2004, I would like to thank all my Council members for their support and note with regret that Bill Dixon, our PR and Marketing Officer, is not continuing with us. He has been a great asset to us, especially during our major fundraising events.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to our trustees, Betty Chappell, Pat Richardson and Philip Horobin who have offered to continue as trustees in the coming year.

I will continue as Chairperson in the coming year as well and look forward to your continued support.

Thank you all.

Saryoo Shah  
Chairperson, Kenya Museum Society



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Linda Mboya of the Nairobi Museum's Public Relations Department reports on

# Museum highlights of



## NMK headquarters: Museum in change

15 October 2005 will go down as a momentous day in the history of the National Museums of Kenya. It was on this day that the Curator of Nairobi Museum put padlocks on the building to symbolically close it in preparation for major expansion and revitalisation of the institution. With that simple act a chapter in the history of the museum was closed and a new one opened, one that marked the beginning of a journey that will change the face of the museum and transform it into a world class institution.

Infrastructure development is a core component of the European Union-funded NMK Support Programme. This includes renovation of the museum galleries, construction of new exhibition space, a visitor centre and other facilities, as well as

the construction of a new administration block. NMK will emerge from the scaffolding with a major facelift and a new look. The construction work is expected to be completed by June 2007.

The process titled "Museum in change" was officially launched by Hon. Najib Balala, the then Minister for National Heritage during a press conference on 11 August 2005 at the NMK headquarters.

Prior to the temporary closure of the museum many activities were carried out, including a detailed inventory of all objects on exhibition before they were relocated. A condition report detailing the conservation status of the objects and relevant recommendations has been compiled. The objects were relocated to purpose-made containers in their respective research departments, while the less delicate were left on site but will be well preserved. Several offices have been relocated while others were to seek alternative premises outside the NMK. The KMS and Nature Kenya offices relocated to sites within the NMK grounds.

Activities geared towards the development of new public programmes (including exhibitions) were also initiated. Notable among these was a workshop on developing the mission, vision and core values of NMK public programmes which was held in August 2004. Another one on the strategy for public programmes was organised in February 2005. A visitor survey training workshop was conducted in November and a survey carried out. A report on the survey was completed in June 2005.

Workshops on exhibition development and management were conducted in April 2005

# 2004-5



The museum refurbishment process was officially launched by Hon. Najib Balala, the then Minister for National Heritage during a press conference in August 2005 at the NMK headquarters.

and concept development in July 2005. Reports on these workshops are ready and available.

Among the key recommendations of the concept development workshop was the formation of three exhibition project teams. The teams will shoulder the process of developing and finalising exhibitions on culture, history and nature ready for re-opening the new-look museum in July 2007. The teams are working round the clock to meet this deadline.

## Exhibitions

The NMK was host to many interesting and captivating temporary exhibitions in 2004 and 2005. The exhibitions fell under the key themes of culture and nature that characterise the NMK public programmes.

### Rock Art in Africa

The Rock Art in Africa exhibition was mounted from November 2004 to February 2005 by the Trust for African Rock Art in association with the NMK. The exhibition presented East African rock art in the wider context of rock art in Africa and the world. Texts and photographs taken from rock art sites in Africa revealed engravings and paintings on stone that characterise humankind's first forms of visual

The only coelacanth specimen ever to be caught off the Kenyan coast became the centrepiece of the exhibition entitled "A very strange catch".

communication. Kakapel, an important rock art site located near Mt Elgon, was reconstructed to scale and explained in the museum. The interpretation introduced visitors to different styles, dates and materials of painting found at this single location.

The use of maps and videos dramatised the dissemination of information on many rock art sites in Africa. Their value, the threats they face, the urgency and need to conserve these examples of the continent's great cultural heritage was underscored.

This wonderful exhibition was opened by Dr Idle Farah, Director General, NMK in November 2004. It also marked the beginning of a conservation project and the development of an interpretive centre for the Kakapel site through a KSh 1.2 million grant kindly offered by Safaricom.

### A very strange catch

The interactive exhibition "A very strange catch" offered interesting snippets of the history, biology and conservation of the coelacanth (*Latimeria chalumnae*), a fish often described as a living fossil. The exhibition which was officially opened in March 2005 by the Belgian Ambassador to



Kenya was yet another exciting event in the museum.

This highly interactive exhibition provided museum visitors an opportunity to see and learn more about one of the flagship specimens of the Ichthyology Department collections. The species was thought to have become extinct millions of years ago until a specimen was caught off the mouth of Chalumna River in South Africa in 1938. The exhibition also provided information about other areas in the world where coelacanths have been found since the first catch and recent efforts to enlarge the information base on the species. The exhibition, which was officially opened in March 2005, ended a few days before the closure of the Nairobi Museum.

The exhibition was moved to Malindi Museum to be viewed by the community that caught the first coelacanth in Kenya. It will certainly attract a wide range of other visitors eager to see the strange catch.

### **Mara Serengeti Ecosystem**

An exhibition on the Mara Serengeti ecosystem was opened in Nairobi Museum in May 2005. The exhibition highlighted the complex interaction of life forms in this delicate ecological system. It also revealed the role of humankind in the changes observed in the region in recent times and necessary actions that should be taken to ensure the continued survival of the ecosystem. The exhibition, consisting of photographs and text on this world-renowned ecological system, was prepared by Artis Zoo of Amsterdam in collaboration with the World Wide Fund for Nature.

### **Young artists' exhibition**

An interesting and inspiring exhibition of paintings and sculptures by young artists mainly from Kenya and the region was mounted in June 2005. The exhibition was supported by the European Union in honour of the late Father John Hanon, who served as a great encouragement to young artists in Matasia–Ngong where he established



Dr Derek Fee, Acting Head of the EU Delegation, with Dr Idle Farah at the opening of the young artists exhibition supported by the EU.

a Catholic Church. Present at the official opening was Prof. Kibutha Kibwana, then Assistant Minister for National Heritage, Dr Derek Fee, Acting Head of the European Union Delegation in Kenya, and Dr Idle Farah, the Director General of NMK.

### **Kiwi art exhibition**

The annual Kiwi art competition and exhibition was also a key event at the NMK in October 2004. It attracts a large number of entries from pupils and primary schools all over the country.

Many other exhibitions and events were hosted at the museum. They included exhibitions by several foreign diplomatic missions.

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## **Regional Museums**

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### **Desert Museum**

Activities towards the development of what has been aptly referred to as the Desert Museum in Loiyangalani, on the shores of Lake Turkana, started in 2004. The museum is intended to provide and present an interpretation of the cultural and natural heritage of diverse communities living in the arid and semi-arid areas of northern Kenya.

Construction work is at an advanced stage while concept development for the proposed exhibitions is also underway. This is a community-oriented NMK supported project with financial resources channelled through the Italian Development Cooperation.



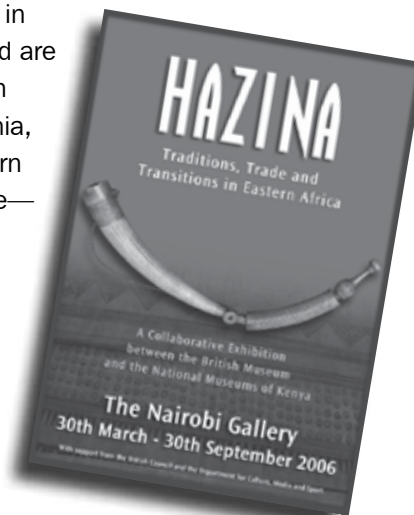
The classic architectural proportions of the old PC's house make it a handsome exhibition venue. It is now called the Nairobi Gallery.

### **Old PC's building**

The old Provincial Commissioner's house, a classic colonial structure built in 1913 in the heart of Nairobi, has been finally refurbished as a museum exhibition facility and opened to the public in November 2005. Officially renamed "The Nairobi Gallery", its first exhibition was "Dreaming in pictures" featuring a valued collection of paintings by Jak Katalikawe, the internationally-renowned Ugandan artist now resident in Kenya. The exhibition was jointly organised by NMK and Frankfurt Museum in Germany.

A landmark exhibition entitled "Hazina: traditions, trade and transitions in Eastern Africa" opened at the same venue in March 2006. The objects displayed are selected from eight Eastern African countries—Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Somalia, Southern Sudan, Southern Ethiopia, Burundi and Mozambique—that are historically and culturally interlinked.

The Hazina ('treasures' in Kiswahili) exhibition represents the culmination of a unique collaboration between NMK and the British Museum in London. It is the first time that Eastern African objects in European collections have been brought back to Africa for public display.



**PHOTOS BY AUDIO-VISUAL DEPARTMENT, NMK**

# El-molo: The forgotten people of Lake Turkana

**Purity Kiura**  
Acting Head of Archaeology  
National Museums of Kenya

**T**he El-molo is a small community of about 700 people living around El-molo Bay on the southeastern shores of Lake Turkana. El-molo Bay is north of Loiyangalani trading centre, about 600 km northwest of Nairobi.

The El-molo live in two settlements, Komote and Layeni, about 5 km apart. Layeni village lies on an extension of the mainland towards the lake, while Komote lies on a sandspit that runs out from the north shore of what is known as El-molo Bay.

The El-molo today live exclusively in impoverished conditions. They rely on aquatic fauna, especially fish. They also practice traditional customs and still retain much of their culture. The community, therefore, retains aspects of a distant past that today no longer exists. Although these people identify themselves as pure El-molo, their contacts with other tribes in the region, especially the Turkana, Samburu and Rendille, have clearly diluted this identity. There are no sanctions against marriage outside the group as was the case in the past. Many El-molo women are married off to men from other tribes. Men from outside the tribe can pay the bride price easily. However not many women from other tribes are marrying into the community, as most El-molo men cannot afford the bride wealth.

## Count Teleki

The El-molo people were first described to the western world in the late 19th century by the explorers Count Teleki and Lieut von Höhnel during one of their expeditions to Africa. The name El-molo was used by von Höhnel as the name applied to the people of the three surrounding tribes—Gelubba (Dassanech),



Samburu and Rendille—who also lived under conditions of extreme privation. According to Teleki and von Höhnel, the El-molo people relied for the most part on food caught in the lake, though they also acquired some grain by working for the Gelubba during harvest time. Later they were forced to rely totally on food caught from the lake, when the Abyssinians (people from Ethiopia) began to make raids on the Gelubba community and thus cut off the only grain supply to the El-molo people.

Purity Kiura with El-molo children at Lake Turkana.



A map of northern Kenya with the location of the El-molo community on the southern edge of Lake Turkana.



An El-molo hut made from leaves of the doum palm.

In the 1930s, the El-molo community consisted of less than 100 people. They were described as living in extreme poverty just as they do today. The majority of the El-molo people during this time had leg deformities. This was most likely due to lack of dietary calcium, as calcium carbonate is precipitated out at high altitude from the rivers that eventually feed Lake Turkana. The lake also has a high concentration of soda because it has no outlets. These two factors together cause a deficiency of calcium carbonate in the waters of Lake Turkana.

When Count Teleki and his team visited, they observed the El-molo community using hooks on lines, rafts and nets for fishing. The nets were made from the doum palm, and were held by men standing in a circle up to their necks in the water with a gap at one point in the circle. Fish were driven towards this gap, and gradually the gap was reduced in size, thus trapping the fish. As the men drew in the net, they retrieved the fish and killed them with an oryx horn dangling down their backs. They also bit off part of the tail, so that they could claim ownership of the fish at the end of fishing. This method of fishing is not popular today, as it requires several men, and also means that fishing can only be carried out in shallow water. Women fished from rocks with a barbless hook and hand-line.

### **The present El-molo people**

During my visit with the El-molo people over the month of September 2001, I was surprised to find that the population had risen to almost 700. The majority are young children under the age of 10 years. The people live in huts made from the leaves of the doum palm. The huts are mainly beehive shaped, and are composed of one room (kitchen, bedroom and sitting room). All the family members sleep in this hut with the father and boys to the right side, while the mother and the girls sleep on the left side.

The El-molo people's resource utilisation strategies are markedly different from those of their neighbours, as they eat primarily fish and occasionally hunt crocodiles and hippopotamus. However, these large animals are rare to find, and thus the El-molos consider them a delicacy. They also value them, as they believe that at one time all the crocodiles and hippos that now live in the lake lived on the land, and were their property. Other food items used by these people are wild fruits that are seasonally available (only after the rainy season).

### **Birds as food**

Birds are readily accepted as food, especially those found along the lakeshore such as pelicans, Egyptian geese, flamingos, and cormorants, as well as a few domestic birds (chickens and ducks) that are kept by some of the villagers. Kingfishers and white herons (egrets) are also common in the area but are considered taboo to eat. These birds are found along the lakeshore where they scavenge on what has been discarded by the fishermen, and also feed on micro-organisms found in the mud along the regressing water edge.

Domestic birds have only been introduced over recent years, and are rarely kept. Those that keep them do so as a means of food for their young children. One old man told us that he had never eaten chicken eggs as he considered them undesirable as a dietary item, and thus always gave them to his son. This however changed when he discovered that we consumed eggs quite often.

During my interviews and observations, I was able to establish that these people rely almost exclusively on fresh or dried fish for their food, although they incorporate other foods that are provided to them by the Kenyan Government through relief agencies, such as yellow maize, beans, soybeans, flour and cooking oil. These items have become important to these people, as they have nothing else with which to supplement their basic diet.



Fishing is normally carried out through harpooning, netting, and hooks on line. In the early days, nets were made from palm string that was twisted, while today they are made from modern nylon thread. It is the work of the men to make and repair these nets, though women are involved once in a while. In the old days, however, it was only the women who were involved with this task.

### Species of fish

Different species of fish are caught during different months in the year as they migrate during the annual cycle. For example, during my visit in the month of September, most of the fish caught were Nile perch, catfish, mudfish and tigerfish. There were hardly any tilapia, as this type of fish had migrated to deeper waters. Catfish, squeakers and Nile perch move from inshore to offshore during the high waters (March-June), and then move back inshore over drier months (July-September). These fish do not like fresh water, which is found at the lakeshore during the rainy season. They therefore migrate to deeper waters. The fish also move into deeper waters to avoid predators, including fishermen. During the rainy season, fishing is mainly carried out in deep waters with the

use of nets, although some fishermen can specialise on other fish that are found inshore. These are the cichlids (tilapia), and labeo as they migrate inshore to spawn. Most fish are known to move to deeper waters when the moon is full.

The most common fish all year round are mudfish, catfish and Nile perch. The El-molo use the netting method for most of their fishing, and this method can only be applied in deep waters where these fish are found during their spawning period. The Nile perch is a big fish, which is caught using a hook and this is another popular fishing method with this community.

Netting fish is carried out in phases, with the nets being laid out in the waters during the afternoon and left overnight. Dawn finds the men in the waters ready to net out the overnight catch. The women wait on the shores for the fishing boats, in order to help the men remove the fish from the nets and clean them. When this has been done, the fish are either taken indoors for family consumption or spread out in the sun to dry, ready for the market or storage for future consumption. The ownership of the fish depends on the group or families involved with each boat and nets. It is conceivable that at times there is a group or family that may not net any fish, and they are provided with fish for their daily consumption by other groups who may be luckier on the day. Ownership of the well-built modern boats is by a group and not individuals. Ownership of these boats is facilitated by non-governmental

Photo left:  
El-molo fishermen with  
hook and line.

El-molo man repairing a  
fishing net.



A typical El-molo settlement. The woman is preparing fish outside her hut.



A turtle shell used by the El-molo people as a plate.

organisations for the purpose of commercial fishing. The other form of boat available is the raft, and this may be individually owned. Rafts are made from tree trunks (especially the doum palm). These can only be used in minor fishing activities, as they cannot carry more than two people and can only transport a small load of fish.

Crocodiles and hippos are hunted primarily with harpoons, and are normally attacked on land and not in water. Both animals have become rare in the region's waters. Most have moved

north towards Sibiloi National Park where hunting is not allowed. However, crocodile hunting is carried out more often than hippo hunting as there are still a few crocodiles breeding within the bay. Despite the fact that hippos remain wisely elusive, difficult to find, and even more difficult to spear, the El-molo men form hunting parties and travel up to 70km north to the hippo breeding grounds. The clan elders who are veterans of many hippo hunts and the young warriors willing to learn how to carry out the mission of hippo hunting are both engaged in this activity. These hunts can take several days and may yield nothing. Thus the hunting parties may only take place once every two or three years because of poor yields.

For example, during my visit (September 2001), I established that the last hippo hunt to be carried out in the region happened more than 10 years previously. There was also no sign of hippo hunts in the near future even though the community has been given a hippo and crocodile hunting licence by

the government to carry out this exercise once a year—but only within other regions of Kenya apart from Lake Turkana. This is almost impossible for the El-molo as they are poor and live in a very remote region with no means of transportation. They have therefore forgotten about hippo and crocodile hunting, and rely on fish. Once in a while, especially during the rainy period, strong and experienced men pack up their fishing equipment and move further north to an area known as Kanderu about 20 km north of Komote village. Here, fishing is carried out for about two weeks. The fish caught during this time is for both consumption and sale. While the strong and able men are away, a few old and experienced men are left behind to catch fish for the community.

The cooking and preparation of fish for consumption in a family is usually the duty of the mother/wife, though the female children may carry out this duty when the mother is busy or away. The fish can either be smoked or boiled. The smoking of fish is usually carried on outside the hut, while the boiling is done in the hut. Boiled fish is a delicacy, especially for the men who also enjoy the soup. It is normal for each member of the family to consume on average one fish such as tilapia or mudfish. Nile perch are normally prepared and processed for sale, because they are very large and difficult to catch.

The El-molo still possess some of the traditional material culture related to food. For example, they use turtle shells as plates and the large bones from Nile perch are used as spoons. They also have cutting tools made from metal. For example, they use large nails to manufacture cutting instruments that are used on fish.

### Domestic animals

Domestic animals are rare. Only a few dozen goats, sheep, cows and donkeys that have been acquired recently from the neighbouring tribes are kept. These animals are herded along the lakeshore and sometimes a few hundred metres away from the village. When asked, most of the El-molo value aquatic fauna more than domestic animals. They



brass wire in the form of rings on the fingers and a single iron-wire band with scrolled ends round the neck. Very young children (below 10 years) possess few ornaments and no clothing, though they usually boast a string of fish vertebrae round their waist. Older children, on the other hand, have acquired modern dress. This is because a high percentage of children are

A tool made from a nail, used by the El-molo to slice fish.

now enrolled in the primary school near the village, and are required to wear uniforms.

### Religion

Religion among the El-molo people is very important and some form of traditional worship and sacrifice is still practised within the community. There are four important shrines in the El-molo community. These shrines were and still are used as places where people visit at different times for prayer and sacrifice. The prayers and sacrifices performed at these shrines have helped to keep peace and harmony among the various clans making up the community, as well as with neighbouring communities. Specific clan members visit these shrines, as different clans are responsible for specific shrines. The shrines are located on an isolated rocky islet between the Layeni and Komote settlements.

Today these shrines are deserted, most likely as a result of the islet becoming an island through rising water levels. Only two of the shrines are functional, though they are also not well taken care of, and most of the items

argue that they only keep domestic animals to economically sustain them, for instance when they need money to send their children to school or hospital. Although cattle raids are common in the region, the El-molo are never attacked, as they are strategically located on the sand spit. They can therefore spot their enemies before attack, and take refuge on nearby islands. Moreover, they have very few domesticated animals to attract raiders. They believe that any tribe trying to attack them would be cursed, as they are a poor community protected by God.

### El-molo dress

Until the early 1900s most of the men were scantily dressed and women wore dresses made from worn-out fishing nets. Today the men are well dressed, with modern trousers or shorts, while the women possess modern garments that have been purchased from traders visiting the region. What distinguishes the El-molo from other groups is their very valuable and distinct ornaments. The women, for example, wear brass or iron wire ornaments round their arms, while small chains of different-sized rings may hang from the lobes of the ears. Beads are sometimes worn round the head, and there are always large numbers of necklaces of ostrich eggshell beads and old-fashioned trade beads hanging in a great mass round the neck like the Samburu. The men wear either a narrow strip of water-tortoise skin as a tight fitting bracelet, or an ornament made from iron or



El-molo female dress (similar to the Samburu).

that are used during prayer and sacrifice have been damaged and even misplaced.

### Conclusion

The El-molo community is the smallest ethnic group in Kenya. It is in danger of being absorbed into surrounding tribal units, particularly through marriage. In addition, the El-molo are slowly and effectively absorbing



A photograph showing the location of two shrines still in use today among the El-molo community.

western ways and cultural practices from neighbouring tribes. This leads to a loss of their traditions. In the near future, the El-molo community will have no traditional staple food (aquatic fauna), no traditional dress

code, no traditional huts and most obviously no customs or traditional culture.

It is therefore important that the community be exposed to ways of preserving their culture, which includes material culture, music and dance. The community's way of life should also be extensively studied and documented, as not much is known or written about them. Some organisations have embarked on preserving El-molo culture through cultural projects. For example, there is an Italian project whose aim is to build a desert museum at Loiyangalani (together with the National Museums of Kenya). This museum will house some of the material culture from the El-molo community. In addition, there is an awareness campaign for the people in the region on how to organise music and dance performances for tourists.

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### About the Author

Purity Kiura is the Acting Head of the Archaeology Department at the National Museums of Kenya. She is also a co-field director with the Koobi Fora Field School in Palaeoanthropology. She has carried out field research on the diet, culture and economy of the El-molo, the Gabra and the Dassanech in northern Kenya since 2001 as part of her doctorate studies at Rutgers University, USA. She has also worked on intercommunity relationships between the Gabra and the Dassanech. This has helped ease the working relationship between these communities and researchers working within the Koobi Fora Research Area.

# Time travel in northern Kenya

Prof JWK Harris

Every year in June, 30 or so undergraduates assemble at the National Museums of Kenya in Nairobi to participate in the Koobi Fora Field School in northern Kenya. Right from the outset, the students are briefed that their journey to the desert wastes on the eastern shores of Lake Turkana at Koobi Fora will be an adventure in science—one where the frontiers of humankind have been literally pushed back millions of years.

So begins an odyssey across time and space. The students will travel back in time and walk over ancient landscapes that are millions of years old, where animal communities—including some of our earliest ancestors—once lived.

The modern day journey by lorry and Land Rover takes three days and 850 km across three-quarters of the length of Kenya. Beginning in Nairobi, the drive takes them over lush and fertile landscapes onto the high plateau flanks of the Great Rift Valley that are the heartland of agriculture in Kenya. Then they plunge kilometres on winding and dusty roads to the floor of the Rift Valley, past fields filled with volcanic cobbles and boulders, to the arid and barren lands that are the home of nomadic pastoralists. The final leg of this journey brings the students to the windswept spit that juts out into the jade-coloured waters of Lake Turkana at Koobi Fora.

The field school prides itself as the pre-eminent field training programme for undergraduate and graduate students in the study of human origins. This collaboration between NMK and Rutgers University, USA has borne unprecedented educational and research successes for an international pool of students. The field school plays a major role in education, as part of the National Museum's overall



mandate, and makes major contributions to museum research. The KFFS is a unique opportunity for the students to learn the basic principles and field methods of palaeoanthropology in one of the world's most productive and spectacular regions for documenting the emergence and evolution of humankind.

**Prof Harris is co-director of the Koobi Fora Field School for Palaeoanthropology.**



**The Koobi Fora Field School (KFFS) is a fully integrated training and research programme of the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) and is jointly administered with Rutgers University, in New Jersey, USA. The field school is staffed by Kenyan and American researchers and support staff. Senior NMK researchers—in particular Dr Mzalendo Kibunjia, Director of Regional Sites and Monuments, Dr Emma Mbua, Head of Palaeontology, and the Acting Head of Archaeology, Dr Purity Kiura—play a major role in both teaching and research.**



The base camp at Koobi Fora, on the eastern shore of Lake Turkana.

The locality where most of the field season is spent is a low altitude desert setting, on the floor of the Rift Valley, at Koobi Fora. Situated on the eastern shores of Lake Turkana, Koobi Fora is part of Kenya's Sibiloi National Park and a place of sparse dryland flora and fauna. The other locality, Segera Wildlife Ranch, is a high altitude plateau grassland setting near Nanyuki. Therefore, the field school could not offer two more starkly contrasting ecological settings within the overall African savannah ecosystem, and this contrast is fundamentally important to the research and training goals of the field school.

Why does the field school place so much emphasis on the field school students gaining a strong understanding of these contrasting settings? It is because the diverse settings of the African savannah are the environments that our ancestors, the African hominins, inhabited. As such, utilisation of these environments played a role in our evolution. From the earliest African hominins to our most recent human ancestors, each species has lived and prospered (or not prospered) within a particular niche, or segment, of this overall savannah ecosystem. Some of our early ancestors inhabited forested areas, taking advantage of the security and resources afforded by trees, whilst others of our ancient lineage inhabited the sparsely vegetated, more open dry lands. Understanding the make-up and character

Photo right: Learning how our ancestors utilised their environment helps students understand the factors that shaped human evolution.

of the plants, animals and settings of these landscapes, helps students to understand the ecology of the past landscapes. So the field school devotes considerable discussion to the effects that changing environments, climates, and biotic communities may have played in moulding and selecting changes in hominin anatomy, physiology, and overall behaviour—changes that the students will see in the fossil and archaeological records contained in the sedimentary deposits when they reach Koobi Fora.

Koobi Fora is a place inhabited since 1968 by a select sub-group of humans: palaeoanthropologists. The base camp at Koobi Fora consists of sleeping and teaching bandas, showers and flush toilets, water treatment plant, solar energy system, and museum support staff. At the edge of Lake Turkana, it serves as the research base for scientists who are studying the extraordinary palaeontological and archaeological deposits found in this area. Deposits here are rich with fossil bones from a diverse collection of animals, including early hominins. These deposits have yielded spectacular collections of archaeological materials, such as stone tools and fossil bones with evidence of stone tool cut-marks that indicate hominin usage. Two million years of history embedded in the eroding sediments hold tantalising clues to humankind's evolution and ecology. This is Koobi Fora, welcome to your time capsule.



Each morning students wake early to a hearty breakfast of porridge, *mandazi* and strong cups of tea or coffee. The teaching banda is also where students take meals. Tables along the outside edge of the large thatched-roof building overflow with skeletal material from hundreds of animals. Teeth, jaws, turtle shells, fish vertebrae, horn cores, and skulls are labelled to taxon and skeletal element. Incredibly, students soon learn to identify the bones. Experts in faunal analysis and the identification of fossil bone help students learn the identification nuances that enable a field archaeologist to spot a blue-black piece of fossil bone on the sedimentary exposures, bend down, and be able to say “bovid metacarpal”, quicker than one can untangle from a wait-a-bit thorn bush. At first glance it may seem overwhelming: students need to learn to identify the animals and the animal groupings—order, family, genus, species—both past and present, understand the skeletal anatomy of diverse types of animals, learn the names of the skeletal elements, know the proximal from the distal bone ends, and to do all this from partial and fragmentary pieces of bones. But students do it every year—starting out with only a cursory knowledge and ending with strong abilities to identify and work with fossil materials. It is one of the wonders of such a programme, that the intensity of the educational experience makes learning such huge amounts of information just a small part of the day.

One of the reasons that students can absorb so much data is that each day the classroom lectures are reinforced in the field and through “hands-on” work. Notebooks quickly fill with drawings of bones, field observations of animals, measurements of artefacts, geological trench sketches, or a feather found on the daily field walks. But it’s not just the bones that students learn: early man had an impressive array of tools manufactured from stones found on the landscape. In that first week of lessons, students learn

about stone tool manufacture, stone tools types that span two million years of innovation, the rocks that the tools are made from, the physics and internal rock structures that control the way certain stones cleave, and how to make a sharp cutting edge from a chunk of stone (with some bloodied fingers along the way). Add lessons in geology, geomorphology, and ecology and it is easy to see how the first week can speed pass. Students get eight academic credits for the field school but some students say they have learned more in the month at Koobi Fora than in a whole year at university.

Other lessons can’t be so easily measured. The harsh environment means that students quickly learn about their own physical limits. Each morning students are reminded, “Hats on, water bottles full, no open-toed shoes”, but after a few days the reminders are unnecessary, as students find themselves filling an extra water bottle, wearing an extra bandana on their heads, and abandoning sandals for well-shod feet.

**K**oobi Fora is a base camp and as such is the jumping off point for explorations within the 3,000 square kilometre region of sedimentary deposits that comprise the study area. After a week or so of morning lessons and afternoon field excursions, students again pack up their gear, the lorries are loaded and the entire camp moves either north to Ileret or northeast to the Karari. Now they will live in their tents for a couple of weeks, and the lessons learned in base camp will be put to use in actual field surveys, excavations, and by doing experiments.



Tables at Koobi Fora overflow with skeletal material from hundreds of animals, which students quickly learn to identify.

The Koobi Fora region is singular in its importance for reconstructing past hominin behaviours. Three factors make this setting so instructive, the first of which is the geographic scale of the deposits. The deposits of interest stretch for tens, if not hundreds, of square kilometres. The ancient landscape, rather than a single hominin find or an isolated occurrence of stone tools, becomes the point of reference.

Secondly, the time depth of deposits is an important factor. There is a record of the history of hominin occupation that is almost continuous and spans two million years.

The third factor is the ongoing study of modern landscapes and peoples. Modern day studies on the vegetation, animals (both wild and domestic) and humans can be undertaken because of access to the Sibiloi National Park and the surrounding lands. Ethnographic and ethno-archaeological studies of these modern day peoples, for example, can provide models for the types of food exploitation and foraging strategies practised by peoples living on similar landscapes in the past. All three factors in tandem make Koobi Fora one of the most important palaeoanthropology regions worldwide.

One of the major time intervals of interest to the field school is between 2.2 and 1.2 million years ago and is known as the Plio-Pleistocene. This time interval

is crucial in human evolutionary studies and witnesses the appearance of the earliest representatives of the genus *Homo*, followed by the emergence of a more evolved form, *Homo erectus* or *Homo ergaster*. In addition, there is the earliest evidence of the first stone tool kits (called Oldowan tools) and some of the earliest evidence for the incorporation of meat into the diet of early hominins. During this transitional period, there are changes to tool manufacture, as well as the production of larger-sized and heavier stone implements (called Acheulean tools), that may be associated with increasing utilisation of meat and perhaps organised hunting. This all occurs against a palaeoenvironmental setting that indicates increasing aridity, heightened seasonality and greater habitat diversity.

During the 2002 KFFS summer field school season, survey was extended from the Ileret area in the northernmost deposits to the east, into a locality known as Area 41. This work gave the field school students a taste of just how difficult it can be to conduct research. No roads, no water, and extreme heat made for exhausting days of survey. But with the discomfort came discovery—students found Oldowan-like artefacts (stone tools) interspersed on the surface with a rich collection of fossil fauna. The site was designated as FwJ20 site complex. In succeeding years the field school has visited the site. During an August/September field season in 2004 and February/March season in 2005 KFFS researchers and National Museum of Kenya staff conducted small scale excavations in this area. Our investigations of this site indicate that the stone tools found here may be some of the oldest stone tools yet discovered (possibly pre-dating two million years). The fossil fauna from this site is something special as well, and some of the pieces show modification through butchery practices utilising stone tools. This makes the site one of the few examples

FwJ20 excavation yields some of earliest stone tools together with hominin-modified bone ever discovered at two million years.



where there is a geographic juxtaposition of tools and evidence of the acquisition and incorporation of meat into the diets of our ancestors on the ancient landscape two million years ago. Moreover, the indications are that this place was a wetter, more vegetated area of the ancient landscape. In addition to documenting the hominin activities at this site, a number of KFFS researchers are conducting complementary research to determine details of the age, the palaeoecology, the palaeoenvironment, and the nature and character of the fossil bone and artefact occurrence for this important locality.

**F**wJj14 is another site of equal importance, where over the last seven or eight years the field school has played a major role. Each year since 1998, KFFS staff and students have undertaken field studies along about a kilometre of outcrop, measuring some 50,000 square metres, in collection area 1A. This has involved survey and systematic excavation of two concentrations of hominin-modified bone, designated FwJj14 north and FwJj14 south. In addition, detailed field geological research is in progress for establishing the age, stratigraphic provenience and context of the archaeological finds, as well as palaeoecological studies for reconstructing the local palaeoenvironment. The incorporation of a palaeobotanist and a botanist into the research to study the large sample of fossil wood collected from Area 1A will be a powerful tool in fleshing out a more detailed picture of the palaeoenvironments. In addition, this sample of fossil wood allows future research goals in modelling early hominin palaeoecology, ranging behaviour and diet to incorporate the identification of fossil trees as an indicator of the variety of plant foods, particularly fruits that were available as a food source for harvesting and consumption by early Pleistocene hominins. This site is slightly younger than the FwJj20 site. It dates to about 1.5 million years



A hominin-modified fossil animal bone showing the distinctive traces of cut-marks and breakage patterns typical of early hominin butchery.

ago, nevertheless. Here at this site are preserved two of the largest concentrations known of hominin-modified fossil animal bones. These bones show the distinctive traces of cut-marks and breakage patterns that a trained eye can see relate to early hominin butchery practices—in other words, using sharp-edged stone tools to cut the meat off the bone, and using the blunt heavier tools to break open the bones to extricate the nutritious bone marrow.

In the final days of the 2004 field school, 11 unquestionably hominin post-cranial bones belonging to the fingers, hand, arm and shoulder were found eroding down the slope of very steep deposits, metres from the previously excavated hominin-modified bone. There was a distinct possibility that these post-cranial bones belonged to the hominin species known as early *Homo erectus*, or *Homo ergaster* as it is known to some researchers. Moreover, there are very few well preserved fore-limb fossil materials, particularly the bones of the hand and arm, of early *Homo erectus*/*Homo ergaster* that have been recovered elsewhere in the fossil record.

In light of the significance of these finds, large scale investigations including excavations of this site took place during the field schools session in 2005. Dr Brian Richmond, a physical anthropologist at George Washington University and a specialist in the post-cranial anatomy of early hominins, joined the KFFS team. Senior scientists and senior graduate students, including Emma Mbua (NMK), Mzalendo Kibunja (NMK), David Braun, Chris Lepre, Jack McCoy, Rhonda Quinn

(Rutgers) and others directed the dig. Over 185 square metres was gridded and excavation yielded further hominin fossil bones, to the great delight of the student participants. These fossil bones are now housed in the National Museums of Kenya, and we await with high interest the detailed studies to find out what hominin taxon the post-cranial bones belong to.

The late Pleistocene and Holocene deposits of the last 12,000 years are also studied by KFFS. One of the priorities in re-establishing Late Pleistocene/Holocene research was to relocate archaeological sites discovered in the 1970s. Finding these sites and beginning to restudy them has been fundamental. We have begun to address issues relating to changing subsistence practices, including the introduction of domestic stock, against a background of environmental change indicated by fluctuating lake levels. In addition to surveys, several Kenyan and American graduate students articulated their own research priorities and have conducted fieldwork in this time interval. Lori Dibble has completed an MA thesis (Rutgers) on Holocene landscapes at Koobi Fora with particular reference to the high lake-stand levels of 9,000 years ago. Her continuing research into the early fishing peoples in the Lake Turkana region will play a role in future field schools, as will the work of Kenyan Emmanuel Ndiema, a beginning doctoral student working on the earliest evidence for the domestication of stock animals 4,000 years ago, which will be the subject of his PhD research.

Dr Purity Kiura (NMK) has completed her PhD thesis (Rutgers) on direct field observations of the food residues and the isotopic analysis of the food consumption of three groups of modern day peoples with different subsistence strategies—Dassenach, Gabra and El-molo. Her research is critical to re-evaluating and modelling the diets of peoples living over the last 10,000 years. Her PhD research,

together with Dr Emma Mbuja's earlier study of the Holocene human remains, form the core for undertaking new research on the human remains, including isotopic studies, which this museum research team has planned for the future.

Dr Kiura's fieldwork amongst the Dassenach at Ileret has been incorporated into the KFFS curriculum over the years. Students visit Dassenach bomas and learn the basics of ethnographic observations and interview techniques. In addition, Alfreda Ibui (NMK) has begun field research on wild plant knowledge, belief and practice amongst the Dassenach that also involves field school students. She has begun transects of the modern landscape to map and identify the vegetation at Koobi Fora. The Dassenach people are a part of the field school community and help us with survey work, serve as camp staff, and teach us the usage of local plants for food, medicine and for making clothing, shelters, and other objects. Improving inter-community relations is an important part of the field school's overall aims and goes hand-in-hand with our collaboration with the Kenya Wildlife Service. By bringing employment opportunities, paying teachers' salaries, providing medicines, and in many other ways, KFFS hopes to have a positive impact on the economy, education, and health standards of the local peoples. We hope the support will have the effect of raising the overall standards of living while helping these nomadic pastoralists retain some of their traditional ways in a rapidly changing world.

Once back at the Koobi Fora base camp, exams are soon over and students pack up for the return trip to Nairobi. Students climb up yet again for the ride in the Unimog, passing now familiar landmarks for the last time, wondering how the weeks spent in this remarkable place can seem so short and so long at the same time. A day's drive later, the convoy pulls into the desert oasis town



of Loiyangalani at the southern tip of Lake Turkana, with its tall palm trees and natural hot spring showers. The journey across space and time is over, but the impressions and memories will be carried with the students forever. Goodbye, place of the commiphera, filled with traces of our ancestors, goodbye to the land where two million years ago seems like a reachable distance.

#### Acknowledgements

*This paper is dedicated to the late William Chesire. William was the head cook on the Koobi Fora Field School and a key person to its overall success. He will be sadly missed. Portions of this paper have benefited immeasurably through the editing of Lori Dibble. I would also like to acknowledge the support and collaboration in all Field School endeavours by my co-director on the field school, the Director-General of the National Museums of Kenya, Dr Idle Farah.*

#### **PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR**

##### About the Author

Professor JWK Harris (PhD, UC Berkeley) is a New Zealander by birth and first began research in Kenya as a palaeoanthropological student in 1971. He conducted large-scale excavations and surveys of Koobi Fora for his PhD thesis. His research topic was the archaeological traces and behavioural interpretations of early hominins 1.5 million years ago. He was a post-doctoral fellow and curator in archaeology based at the National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi from 1976-1980. After he returned to the United States, he was appointed Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin. He has been at Rutgers University in New Jersey since 1988. He was Chairman of the Anthropology Department from 1992 to 2005 and has been co-director of the Koobi Fora Field School for Palaeoanthropology since 1996.

He is currently on extended sabbatical leave as a Research Associate of the National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi.

# Building the Lunatic Line

Bryan Harris

**This article is adapted from talks given by Bryan at the Nairobi Railway Museum, and at the Know Kenya Course.**

The date 20 December 1901 was a momentous date in Kenya's history. On this day Florence Preston, Englishwoman and wife of a railway engineer, drove in the final spike of the last rail of the brand new Uganda Railway, literally on the shores of Lake Victoria. This meant that a line connecting Mombasa with the source of the Nile, a distance of over 900 kilometres and an undertaking lasting four-and-a-half years, at the vast cost of £5.5 million (probably over £500 million in today's money), was officially completed.

So who was Florence Preston and why was a Victorian lady doing something very unladylike so far from her homeland deep in what was then quaintly referred to as the 'Dark Continent'?

For the answer to this question and others that surrounded the 'opening up' of East Africa, one goes back to the Berlin

Conference of 1886 when most of Europe's powerful nations, for which read Great Britain, France and Germany with Belgium, Italy and Portugal struggling to catch up, resolved to put an end to the slave trade and the unseemly scramble for Africa. The Europeans claimed lofty motives and told themselves that by dividing the continent into respective spheres of influence and control, the trade in human misery would be stopped once

and for all. Grand words and as usual in politics, very probably no more than a half-truth. Not every important nation was represented because, even though the United States was emerging as an industrial giant, the opening up of 'the West' still fully occupied the government in Washington. Russia was going through a long period of civil unrest while the Japanese, locked away in their cold and misty archipelago, still viewed the outside world with xenophobic distrust. This was Europe's show, pure and simple.



Florence Preston driving in the last peg of the railway line in 1901.

"Mount Longonot", a 59 Mountain Class engine, climbs the Eastern Rift with the real Mount Longonot in the background.



Among the many declarations of good intent that emanated from the conference were undertakings to develop the African hinterland by means of the construction of railways. In the late 19th century a round-trip from the coast to Lake Victoria, which nowadays can be comfortably done by plane in the space of a morning, was an enterprise involving many months, dozens—maybe hundreds—of porters, and undertaken at great risk to life and limb.

Being the top dog of the time, with her Empire fast approaching its zenith, Britain naturally wanted the best bits of the continent for herself. But there was a special reason why Britain coveted East Africa. She had India—the jewel in the crown of empire—and she had recently to all intents and purposes annexed Egypt and with it control of the Suez Canal. The canal was the lifeline to India, but the nub of it all was the recently named Lake Victoria hidden away in East Africa which, in 1875, was proved by Henry Morton Stanley to be the principal source of the Nile on which Egypt, 3000 kilometres to the north, was wholly dependant.

To secure the headwaters of the Nile, Britain had declared protectorate status over Uganda in 1894 but discovered that it was an impossibly difficult territory to administer and that a railway linking it to the coast was the only solution. Remarkably, the area through which the railway was intended to pass was seen merely as a means to an end, simply as a place to be got through as quickly as possible with no thought given to its vast potential. It did not even have a proper name and was dubbed by the British simply ‘The East Africa Protectorate’.

Not until the next century did Kenya officially come into being and, until 1902, Uganda’s border followed a course east of Lake Baringo, passing through Naivasha and the Kedong Valley which lies just west of the Ngong Hills, a mere 30 kilometres or so from present day Nairobi.

In 1894, plans for the construction of the Uganda Railway had at last been finalised with the chosen route being that

surveyed by a British army officer in 1892. Until then many alternatives were actively considered including one that would have taken Malindi as its starting point. As with most things British, the formation of a committee was an essential first step, and a Railway Subcommittee of the House of Commons was duly formed in London. One of its first acts was to appoint George Whitehouse, a veteran of railway building in India, as Chief Engineer. Equipped with only



Sir George Whitehouse,  
Chief Engineer of the  
Uganda Railway.

the most rudimentary maps and drawings, Whitehouse set to his task with gusto and the first rails were laid at Mombasa just a few months later on 30 May 1896. So began the construction of the “Lunatic Line”, a name taken from a satirical poem by one of its most savage critics, the radical British Member of Parliament, Henry Labouchere:

*“What is the use of it, none can conjecture,  
What it will carry, there’s none can define,  
And in spite of George Curzon’s\* superior  
lecture,  
It is clearly naught but a lunatic line.”*

Whitehouse’s immediate problems were that there was no deep-water wharf in Mombasa, Kilindini in those days being a

\*Lord Curzon was the British Foreign Minister of the day.

gently shelving beach, at which to unload the mountains of materials and supplies needed for construction of the railway, and nowhere to house the virtual army of Indian artisans who were being shipped over to carry out most of the actual work. Fresh water was another problem, only partially resolved when a distillation-cum-filtration plant arrived from Europe months later.

Five short kilometres from the starting point, Whitehouse encountered the first of many obstacles in the form of Makupa Creek, the shallow stretch of water separating Mombasa Island from the mainland. The steelwork intended for the crossing was still being manufactured in England and there was insufficient local wood available for a stopgap structure with the result that eight precious months were to elapse before the creek was crossed by a temporary bridge. Meanwhile, earthworks commenced on the mainland side and quickly reached the formidable Mazeras and Changamwe escarpments over which the railway would have to ascend nearly 200 metres over a distance of fifteen kilometres, making it one of the steepest gradients of any railway anywhere.

Not surprisingly, this hurdle and the Makupa problem (the all-steel Salisbury Bridge, named after Lord Salisbury, the British Prime Minister of the day, was not completed until 1899) took their toll on

progress. This meant that ten months after the start of construction, the railway had advanced just 36 kilometres from Mombasa, a rate of progress which, if sustained, would mean that completion would not take place until 1914.

The Railway Subcommittee was duly concerned and appointed Ronald Preston as the engineer in charge of plate laying in February 1897. Preston, like Whitehouse, had cut his teeth on railway construction in India and, as the Uganda Railway had adopted the same metre gauge in use throughout most of the subcontinent, it turned out to be an inspired choice, or perhaps, simply a lucky one. With him came his wife Florence who was to accompany her husband all the way to Lake Victoria and who, as noted, was given the honour of symbolically driving home the last key on the lakeshore all those years later. Prestons have lived in Kenya ever since and today Ronald's grandson is still carrying on the engineering tradition.

Preston made his mark almost immediately but in truth the terrain was now much more conducive to rapid progress than that experienced earlier. The Taru desert was relatively flat for the next 160 kilometres, taking the railhead to Voi. The Tsavo River, 220 kilometres from the coast, was the next serious obstacle to be encountered by the railway builders. For most of the year, the river took on the appearance of a gently flowing stream, but its name, in translation meaning 'slaughter', sounded a warning.

On to the scene appeared yet another veteran of Indian railways, Colonel JH Patterson whose job it was to design and supervise the construction of a permanent bridge over the Tsavo. A temporary wooden structure was completed early in 1898 but then disaster of an entirely unforeseen nature struck the undertaking. The mangled corpse of an Indian worker was found beside the river surrounded by pugmarks in the bloody sand. Word that a lion was the culprit spread through the labour lines like wildfire and, for a time, work on the track was totally abandoned while the terrified Indians refused to move



Ronald Preston, the engineer in charge of plate laying, in this photo taken in 1951, a year before he died. Prestons continue to live in Kenya today.

out of their barricaded quarters. Over many months, several lions becoming ever bolder and exhibiting uncanny cunning, made off with at least 28 Indian workmen and many African labourers, while Patterson, taking on the role of hunter, tried vainly to trap or shoot the man eaters. Eventually, of course, he did but it took nine months and the permanent bridge that should have taken four months to build required the best part of a year. Years later



Patterson wrote a best selling account of his experiences in his book *Man Eaters of Tsavo*.

Not so well known is that marauding lions created problems all along the line from Voi—where a road engineer named O’Hara was butchered in his tent in full view of his wife and family—almost to the outskirts of what would become Nairobi. At Kima, 420 kilometres from Mombasa, the lions made their most audacious kill when, in June 1900, the Superintendent of Police, Charles Ryall was dragged from his berth *inside* his private carriage and eaten.

In spite of the many setbacks, by the start of the new century progress had regained some of its momentum, but not enough to satisfy the Railway Subcommittee which argued that, after two years, half the work should have been completed instead of the actual one-third. Who ever insinuated that logic is not the strong point of MPs, but what to do? The answer was obvious and time honoured in its execution: send out another bunch of experts. They did and their recommendation was simplicity itself: take a new alignment to the lake thereby shaving 90 kilometres off the total route. Brilliant! By

a deft sleight of hand, the rate of progress was back on schedule although Kisumu and not the original destination would become the terminus effectively consigning the original purpose of the railway (to secure the headwaters of the Nile) to the waste bin.

On 24 May 1899, the railhead reached an unprepossessing, swampy area at the foot of the Kikuyu escarpment that had the single merit in that it was level

ground. This was at kilometre 526 and Whitehouse decided to take a breather before the challenges ahead and shifted his headquarters from Mombasa to *Uaso-en-Airobe*, a Maasai expression meaning ‘river of cold water’ which soon became abbreviated and bastardised to become ‘Nairobi’.

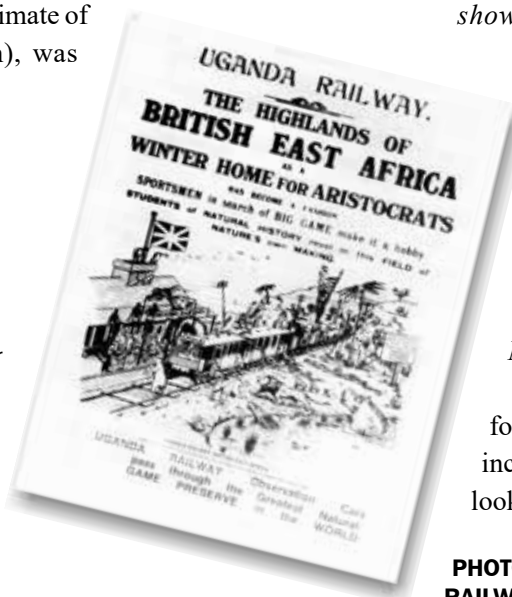
The task of climbing the escarpment, descending the eastern wall of the rift, ascending the western wall and the descent towards the lake was a massive undertaking calling for all of Whitehouse’s ingenuity. In the process, he designed and built a temporary funicular railway to enable plate laying to be continued in the forward areas while cuttings and viaducts were constructed along the east wall. On cresting the Mau Summit on January 1901, the railway reached its maximum elevation of 2,550 metres and the highest point of any railway in the British Empire, yet another ‘first’. However, even this lofty altitude was surpassed in 1925 when the line was finally extended to Uganda, crossing the equator and passing over the Timboroa summit in western Kenya at a height of 2,780 metres.

Now the race was on to complete the railway by the end of the year with just 160

Photo left:  
The grave of the unfortunate Charles Ryall can still be seen in the Railway Cemetery in Nairobi today.

kilometres to go. The line's only tunnel was built on this section and it looked as if the final objective would be reached quite easily until the warlike Nandi decided that they did not like railways or foreigners and started attacking the encampments. Nevertheless, a peace treaty of sorts was cobbled together that allowed work to continue and, early in December, the tracks reached the village of Kibos, from where Whitehouse and Preston viewed the lake for the first time. Even then the stubborn Nandi and unseasonably heavy rains that caused yet another outbreak of dysentery delayed construction. Nevertheless, on 19 December 1901, the last rails were bolted together and the following morning Florence Preston had the honour of hammering home the final spike and renaming the lakeside spot Port Florence. It was over. The 'Lunatic Line', comprising 920 kilometres of tortuous metre gauge railway built at enormous cost to human life and the British Exchequer (£5.5 million against an original estimate of £1.93 million), was complete.

A poster from 1912 advertising East Africa as a tourist destination.



The aftermath we know. The Uganda border was shifted westwards to its present position in 1902, Whitehouse—but not the deserving Preston—was knighted, the East Africa Protectorate was dismantled and Kenya came into being (but formally only in 1920).

Port Florence reverted to its former name of Kisumu, but not without some disagreement and confusion, as I only recently found out.

It is commonly believed that the lakeside settlement was named after the wife of Robert Preston but not so! By coincidence the wife of George Whitehouse was also called Florence and it was after her that Whitehouse decided to name the end of the line. However the new identity was shortlived as this part transcript of a letter from Sir Harry Johnston, Special Commissioner for Uganda, reveals:

*“I understand that you expressed a wish to associate the name of Mrs. Whitehouse with some station. The Foreign Office has shown itself unwilling to accept the term ‘Port Florence’ it being considered that if the native name of the place be laid aside, the European name to be chosen should be that of some member of the British royal family or of some great explorer associated with the discovery of Lake Victoria Nyanza.”*

No wonder the British are noted for their stuffiness! The word Kisumu, incidentally, is Dhuluo and means “to look for food”.

**PHOTOS BY COURTESY OF THE RAILWAY MUSEUM, NAIROBI**

#### About the Author

Bryan Harris is a freelance journalist and author who, upon arriving at Mombasa in 1948, fell in love with the romance of the rail journey to Nairobi, a fascination which has endured to the present day.

# Moving elephants



**E**lephants are wonderful creatures, and the more we learn about them, the more we find that humans and jumbos share much in common: intelligence, deep emotions, strong family ties, the ability to communicate over long distances and a good memory. We also share another trait—the power to destroy.

In the 1970s and 1980s elephant herds over most of Africa were being slaughtered for their ivory. Kenya led the global campaign to ban the international sale of the commodity in 1989 through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Reduced poaching for ivory, coupled with improving wildlife management in many African countries, has resulted in some elephant populations growing enormously. When the number of elephants becomes too numerous for their habitat to support, they end up raiding surrounding farms to find food. Some researchers claim that many elephants are suffering from post-traumatic stress

disorder after years of abuse by humans and are out for revenge. Whatever the reasons, in many places in Kenya today jumbos are increasingly killing and injuring people and destroying crops and property.

Because of our recent appreciation of the qualities of elephants, and also for ethical and economic considerations related to tourism, Kenya has chosen not to shoot elephants to control their numbers, as was commonly done in the past. So, if one can't shoot elephants, what can one do to reduce the human-elephant conflict?

Until effective contraception methods can be developed, about the only other option is to move elephants from overpopulated habitats to areas with more space and fewer people. Called translocation,

**Dan Stiles,  
Chairman of the  
Shimba Support  
Group**



this was done in late 2005 by Kenya Wildlife Service for the Shimba Hills-Mwaluganje Forest area. This population had grown from about 300 in 1977 to over 650 in 2005.

The protected area of the Shimba Hills National Reserve and Mwaluganje Elephant Sanctuary is only 250 km<sup>2</sup>, an area that Moses Litoroh, Research Scientist for KWS, says can comfortably support fewer than 300 elephants. Moses had documented more than 100 human deaths and injuries from jumbos over a 20-year period, with vast acreages of crops destroyed. Farmers were crying for help. Not only that, but the pachyderms were damaging the precious tropical rainforest. The Shimba Hills has one of the last remaining significant patches of indigenous coastal forest, and forms part of the Eastern Arc biodiversity hotspot. Its over 1,300 plant species, with 282 of them being endemics and 57 classified as 'rare', makes the area a global Centre of Plant Diversity. Something had to be done.

The Kenyan government, to its credit, decided to shoulder the considerable financial burden on its own and voted a KSh 250 million (USD 3.4 million) budget to translocate up to 400 elephants from Shimba to a remote corner of Tsavo East National Park. Elephant numbers are still well below their 1980s population size in this area. The decision was not without controversy, as various politicians complained about the cost for the cash-strapped country, and about increasing elephant problems for people near the reception area. Many thought it would never get off the ground without outside help, but in late August 2005 KWS surprised many by launching the operation with much fanfare.

The venture was one hundred per cent Kenyan, from the helicopter pilot through to the capture teams, veterinarians, transporters and management staff. Patrick Omondi led the operation, with assistance from Moses Litoroh (elephant spotter), John Kanyingi (head of capture teams) and Elizabeth Mwanzia (head of vet teams). There were a few minor glitches in the beginning, but after a few days of practice the KWS crew worked with military precision to translocate 151 elephants. Monitoring has shown that they are doing well in their new home. The following photos will show the reader a little of what is involved in capturing and moving tonnes of elephants.



1. Moses Litoroh and David Kimutai spent months identifying bulls and family groups led by matriarchs. From these, Moses selected those to be moved and spotted their location from a helicopter. Here, the chopper is herding a family towards the capture teams. The objective is to capture and transport the whole family and release them together in order to reduce stress. The jumbos are darted with tranquilizer by a vet from the helicopter.



2. When the tranquilizer drug starts to take effect the elephants scatter in every direction, and eventually fall unconscious. Moses directs the capture and vet teams to the spots where they lie. Moses, on left of picture, and Patrick Omondi to his right, the translocation director, oversee the work on one matriarch.



3. The feet of the jumbos are tightly bound to prevent injury to man or beast during the operation.



4. The elephant is manhandled onto a rubber mat for loading.



5. A crane lifts the jumbo onto a field transport vehicle.



6. The elephants are taken to the translocation vehicle.



7. The translocation vehicle, called the Prime Mover, is made up of three containers. The first is used to place the captured pachyderm and stimulate it to wake up. It is then driven into the second container and the sliding door is shut to make way for the next elephant. The trumpeting inside what is effectively a huge tin can after arousal is extraordinary.



8. Here a juvenile is loaded into the wake-up container.



9. Each tranquilized elephant was numbered in the field for identification to carry out follow-up work. Number 55 is bundled into the can.



10. These two siblings will wake up together.



11. This matriarch was fitted with a satellite transmitter necklace so that the family group can be tracked after release in Tsavo East. The majority of released elephants remained in the park, though two bulls that had strayed to the Arabuko-Sokoke forest area had to be put down after causing trouble.



12. Dr Zahoor Kashmiri, a veterinarian who assists KWS and is familiar with translocation exercises, said that the Shimba-Tsavo East operation was carried out professionally and with an admirably low loss rate. In the rough terrain and harsh climatic conditions of Shimba-Mwaluganje, a 10% loss would be acceptable. Out of 151 elephants captured, only six died—about a 4% loss. Well done, KWS.



13. The author and photographer Dan Stiles. Dan began his Kenya experience in 1971 as an archaeological assistant on the Koobi Fora digs at Lake Turkana. After completing graduate school at Berkeley, USA, he taught archaeology at the University of Nairobi, and later worked at UNEP. Since 1999 he has been carrying out ivory trade investigations around the world. He is currently chairman of the Shimba Support Group, which aims to conserve the biodiversity of the Shimba Hills.

# THE BLACK JEWS OF KENYA

Cynthia Salvadori

When people found out I was writing an historical *Glimpses of the Jews of Kenya*,<sup>1</sup> a surprising (to me) number of non-Jews were extremely interested. And almost everyone immediately asked two questions: Are there any black Jews in Kenya? Are they related to the Falashas of Ethiopia?

The answers are ‘yes, sort of’, and ‘definitely not’.

To begin with: the Falashas. In the first few centuries AD there was a substantial influx of Jews from Southern Arabia into what is now northern Ethiopia; and a significant amount of the ancient Hebraic culture was absorbed by the Ge’ez speakers around Aksum—hence the incorporation of the famous story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba into Ethiopian mythology. A number of local Jewish communities took root, but using Ge’ez rather than Hebrew as their liturgical language. They called themselves Bete Isra’el, but were known to their non-Jewish neighbours as Falasha, an Amharic word meaning exile, or immigrant.

Despite this marginalised identity, around the 13th century the Falashas built up a strong little kingdom for themselves in what is now northwestern Ethiopia. But warfare was endemic and in the latter part of the 16th century the Christian Amhara managed to destroy the Falasha kingdom, resulting in the dispersal of the Bete Isra’el. By the 17th century most of them had expediently converted, for those who did not had their farmlands appropriated. Those who remained true to their faith were those who



A young member of the congregation, photographed inside the Mombasa Synagogue.

had other skills to enable them to survive; thus the Falasha became known as potters and weavers and smiths. Recent research indicates that it was probably they who built the famous 17th and 18th century castles of Gondar, together with Jesuit priest-architects and Indian stonemasons! But life was hard, and by the mid-20th century only some 25,000 Falashas remained, concentrated in several villages just north of Gondar—nowhere remotely near Kenya.

Their existence was brought to the attention of Israel, where authorities formally recognised them as Jews in 1975. Then the Israeli government paid the Ethiopian government a certain amount per Falasha head and airlifted almost the entire Falasha population, a total of 22,000 men, women and children out of Ethiopia, one third in Operation Moses in 1984 and the remaining two thirds in Operation Solomon in 1991.<sup>2</sup> All were taken directly to Israel—none came to Kenya.

<sup>1</sup> The Nairobi Hebrew Congregation was celebrating the centenary of its founding and commissioned the book to document its history.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that this was the most massive purchase of human beings in recent history seems to have escaped most people’s attention.

Thus there is no connection, either historical or contemporary, between the black Jews of Kenya and the Falashas of Ethiopia.

Nevertheless, some people, including scholars, have postulated a connection between certain ethnic groups in Kenya and the ancient Hebrews. At the beginning of the last century the German anthropologist Merker was studying the Maasai in what had just been defined as German East Africa (Tanganyika as it later became). After extensive research he alerted the reader

*It must here be understood in advance that I regard the Masai as being descended from those of the nomadic Semites to whom the oldest Hebrew pastoralists belong. I believe that in the pages that follow—specially in the fourth section—I shall prove this theory. (Merker 1904, p.4)*

Merker 'proved' it to the extent that when the British anthropologist AC Hollis published his book on the Maasai the following year, he referred to Merker's theory. Even

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***“Some tribes, especially the Kalenjin and Meru tribes, have ancient traditions which relate that their ancestors were slaves in Egypt, and escaped through a parted Sea, pursued by a wicked King.”***

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though subsequent anthropological research has concluded that the Maasai have a Nilotic rather than a Semitic origin, rumours of 'the lost tribes of Israel' have continued to float around. Dr Manfred Lehmann, the first

historian of the Nairobi Hebrew Congregation, wrote in his introduction 20 years ago

*I should, in closing, mention there is also another aspect in Kenya which makes it very exciting to be a Jew here. There are such apparent ties between Judaism and the traditional religions of Kenya, regardless of tribe. In Kenyan religions, God—whether called “Asis” in the Kalenjin, “Were” in the Luhya, “Nyasaye” in the Ludo, “Ngai” in the Kikuyu, “Mungu” in the Swahili, “Engoro” in the Abagusii or “Olaitorian” in the Maasai language—is always perceived as One, Invisible God, who cannot be seen as represented in a graven image, nor can He be conceived as having either a mother or a son. No wonder that this remarkably pure monotheism has made so many Kenyans feel true affinity with Judaism and the*

*Hebrew Bible which is the source of pure monotheism...*

*I have met groups—especially in the Kakamega area—who are convinced that they descend from the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel. This did not surprise me, since the Talmud (written about 1500 years ago), in Tractate Sanhedrin, states that the Ten Tribes migrated to Africa. Some tribes, especially the Kalenjin and Meru tribes, have ancient traditions which relate that their ancestors were slaves in Egypt, and escaped through a parted Sea, pursued by a wicked King. The Maasai and Kalenjin have practices, which appear to have Biblical parallels. (Lehmann 1984, p. v, vi)*

The idea appealed even to Kenya's ex-president, Daniel arap Moi.

*Moi wonders out loud whether the Kalenjin tribe, of which he is a member, could be one of the lost tribes because some of their practices are so similar to those of Jews. ('The Jewish Traveller', Hadassah, December 1995, p.36)<sup>3</sup>*

This feeling of 'true affinity' is perhaps why the answer to the first question is 'yes'. Definitely, visibly, yes. There are black Jews in Kenya: a handful of faithful black Kenyans who attend the services at the Nairobi synagogue; two sects in western Kenya, with hundreds of followers each, which claim to be Jewish; and another group in Mombasa who describe themselves as 'spiritual Jews'.

*Of late, the remarkable interest in Judaism among Kenyans of all tribes had made itself felt and as a result we welcome regularly Kenyans to our services, followed by discussions and lectures. These have also spilled over into the neighbouring campus of Nairobi University, where I have been invited to lecture on Judaism to hundreds of students. (Lehmann 1984, p. 10)*

Even visitors from overseas are struck by the presence of black Africans in the Nairobi synagogue.

*Nairobi, Kenya, Sept. 30 (JTA) — Rosh Hashanah here is a microcosm of the diversity of Jewish life in the Diaspora — with some Africa twists.*

*The Nairobi Hebrew Congregation, which serves as the community center for about*

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<sup>3</sup> And so, it seems, are many of their words; see The Kalenjin Heritage by B and G Fish.

300 people, hosted a diverse but small group for the holiday. There were Israeli diplomats, expatriate Israeli and American businessmen, Americans working for nonprofit organisations, white Kenyan Jews and devoted black Kenyan followers of Judaism who have not converted.

. . . During Saturday and Sunday services, a handful of white and black children wearing yarmulkes chased each other around inside the synagogue and in the gardens outside.

. . . Jehu Kitoli, one of the unconverted Kenyans, wore a yarmulke and prayer shawl several rows away from Dr David Silverstein, a community leader and the personal physician of former Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi. (Blake Lambert, 'In Kenya, an unorthodox crowd observes Orthodox Rosh Hashanah' in JTA Print News, 10/8/03)

When I have attended services at the synagogue, I too have been struck by the black Kenyans in the congregation. For the regular Friday evening and Saturday morning services, the community is hard pressed to roust out the *minyán*, the quorum of ten male Jews over the age of 13 that is necessary for a service to be held. There are almost as many black Kenyan men present, and the second time I went there were more black Kenyan women there than white. But the black Kenyans are not officially converted Jews; they describe themselves as 'congregants'. They would, however, like to become converts, as one of the 'faithful black Kenyan attendees' wrote to the community magazine's editor in November 2003.

Dear Sir /Madam,

I am a regular reader of your magazine SHELANU and also a non-Jewish Congregant at the NHC Synagogue.

I am interested in Jewish history and Judaism in general and wish to further my ambitions in this area. Consequently I have embarked on a serious study of the religion with a view of officially converting in the near future. I am interested in Jewish history . . . .

Finally, I wish all Jewish people a happy Chanukah season.

MAZEL TOV.

Jehu L. Kitoli

Conversion, however, presents a problem. Conversion to Judaism is very formal, requiring long supervised study and requiring

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the offices of two fully fledged rabbis. In Kenya there has hardly ever been even one rabbi, and so conversions cannot be done here; the several people in Kenya (all but one of European descent) who have converted to Judaism have done so in Israel.<sup>4</sup>

Although the 'devoted black Kenyan followers' of Judaism number only a handful in the Nairobi synagogue, there are hundreds, some say thousands, in western Kenya. They are conspicuous enough to have attracted the attention of journalists:

*We are approaching the compound where Elijah Masinde, the legendary Bukusu leader, self-proclaimed prophet and founder of the Dini ya Musumbwa sect, hid in the early 1940s to avoid arrest by the colonial government. The place has since been turned into a shrine by the Juda Israeli sect, whose members believe they are the real Jews. "God revealed himself to Africans in the 1920s and told them they were the Israelites," says*

<sup>4</sup> When the reporter Joseph Nyanoti quoted Zohar Giat whom he described as the 'acting rabbi of the Nairobi synagogue', as saying 'one can only become a Jew through the mother' he was misquoting—or misunderstanding—the minister (EA Standard, July 4, 1999).



The signboard to the Mombasa Synagogue at Kisimani, north of Mombasa.

Moses Wafula, the high priest and self-styled representative of the Biblical Moses. According to Wafula, “spirits” have shown that Jesus was an African, not a Semite. (Antony Nyongesa in *Daily Nation*, April 2, 2004)

Masinde soon left the *Juda Israeli* to form the *Dini ya Musumbwa*, which roused the suspicions of the colonial government and resulted in his arrest in 1944 and the collapse of that organisation. But the sect he initially founded still survives, with a few hundred *Juda Israeli* continuing to follow their version of Judaic traditions.

Another Jewish group was formed in western Kenya a few decades later.

*Judaism was first introduced in Kenya in the Ol Kalou area more than 30 years ago by a Jew named Andrew Shoemaker from Jerusalem. He ordained three men in 1970 as Judaists. . . . “Pamphlets on Judaism were all over Ol Kalou town,” recalls Njoroge Gikuhi, an elder of Mt Zion Synagogue. “An address was enclosed for those who wanted to seek more news about Judaism from the Jerusalem Synagogue based in Israel. I remember the three wrote back and lessons*

*started flowing. That’s how they learnt about Judaism.” The lessons were provided by a Rabbi who converted to non-orthodox, Andrew Dugger from Jerusalem Synagogue. . . . The Jewish sanctuary — Mt Zion Synagogue — was built in 1987. It is an isolated stone building hidden under thick vegetation located 4 km from Ol Kalou town. . . . Mt Zion Synagogue has about 200 members. (Irene Kimani in *EA Standard*, July 4, 1999)*

Some curious Israelis have gone out to visit the Zion Synagogue, but they have gone as individuals, not representing the Nairobi Hebrew Congregation, which does not consider these people to be true Jews. As an NHC member put it, “They are not recognised [by us] as Jews but they claim an affinity to Judaism”.

And curious myself, I went to discover the Mombasa Synagogue!

While I was rushing around Nairobi getting as many *Glimpses* as I could, an Israeli member of the NHC happened to mention that while driving north out of Mombasa she had seen, somewhere along the main road in Nyali, a sign for a synagogue. She thought

it might have something to do with Paradise Hotel in Kikambala, a kosher hotel catering specifically to Jewish tourists. Somehow that seemed unlikely. Given the tight schedule I regretfully had no time to go to the coast and investigate, so the sign ended up as a dubious finale in an appendix in *Glimpses*.

However it remained an intriguing question in my mind. When I finally got down to Mombasa, a couple of months after *Glimpses* had been published, to spend a few days with close friends, I was determined to look for this unlikely sign even though I felt it might be rather a wild Jews chase.

My hostess, a professional photographer, was game. We drove north along the main road; the driver easing the car through the traffic slowly and carefully, Shirin scanning left, myself right.

And there it was. Amongst all the lively roadside clutter of Kisimani, I got a glimpse of a neatly painted sign, middling large: "MOMBASA SYNAGOGUE. WELCOME". We bumped cautiously down the rough track in a typical *majengo* village and after about 100 metres came to a substantial coral-rag building on which was another signboard, 'Mombasa Synagogue'. The bright blue door was closed but the tailors stitching away in a kiosk across the lane assured us "the pastor" was inside.

And there he was, Joseph Mathenge. He was pleased to tell us how the community, which he referred to as 'Spiritual Jews' came into being—the work of a Jew from Israel named Schumacher who started converting people around 1970. There is now a congregation of some 60, of a great many different tribes: Kikuyu (like himself) and Kamba, Luhya and Luo, Teita-Taveta, even some local Giriama. "No, they don't come to the area as Jews, they join us here." They gather for prayers every Sabbath morning, the men sitting on the wooden benches on one side, the women on the other, wearing long dresses and head scarves 'for modesty'.

Close by is a mosque. I asked Joseph how he and his congregation got along with the Muslims all around. He said they had never had a problem, 'the power of God protects us'.



Approaching the Mombasa Synagogue through the village of Kisimani.

The suggestion that 'maybe it had something to do with the Paradise Hotel' was not so far off. Joseph said that a Mr Yehudah of that hotel had been helping out, "the rabbi came here often, we communicated a lot, we had lots of brothers, friends at the hotel. They would supply us with books, calendars, literature from Israel, but no, not with money."

When I got back to Nairobi and gleefully told a leading member of the NHC that I had discovered a real live local synagogue in Mombasa, his immediate reaction was, "it can't be a synagogue". I showed him Shirin's photographs on which the words clearly appeared. He wanted to know the preacher's qualifications, if members of the congregation had certificates of conversion. I said that I really hadn't checked people's papers. I had

The Ten Commandments, written in Hebrew, inside the Mombasa Synagogue.



the feeling he was not as excited as I was that I'd got a glimpse of yet another bit of Jewry in Kenya, hidden away in the *majengo* of Mombasa.

**PHOTOS BY SHIRIN SONDHI**

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# Between cultural nostalgia and cultural amnesia: African museums and the archival memory

Professor Ali A Mazrui

Ernest Renan, the French philosopher and historian, once observed that the secret of nation-building was to get one's history wrong. He conceded that it was of the essence of a nation that all individuals should have much in common, but it was also imperative that "they should all have forgotten much". Renan declared:

*To forget and—I will venture to say—to get one's history wrong are essential factors in the making of a nation.<sup>1</sup>*

But what is the process by which one does indeed get one's history wrong in order to get one's national identity right? Our paper carries the story further analytically, examining the role of the collective memory in its four functions of preservation, selection, elimination and invention. Museums play a major part as physical documentation of memory.

We hope to examine more closely how positive preservation of memory can become a form of nostalgia—a temporal homesickness, idealising the past as our ideal home. Negative selection by the memory can lead to elimination and amnesia—a partial suppression of an unwanted past. Both nostalgia and amnesia can be forms of "getting one's history wrong".

We also hope to show how historical invention can be consolidated into a false memory—placing something in the past that was never there before. Somewhat surprisingly, Ernest Renan did not address this issue of the invention of history in relation to nationhood—Renan was more concerned with selection and elimination of memories. And yet the invention of history is as old as the role of mythology in ancient societies. Did the Yoruba of Nigeria really originate in Mecca? Were the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia a lost tribe of Israel? Was the royal house of Ethiopia descended from King Solomon? Where does history end and legend begin?



A shorter version of this paper was delivered under the auspices of the Kenya Museum Society and the National Museums of Kenya in July 2005.

Because of the oral tradition, African history is particularly prone to the forces of myth-making and legend-building. Tribal founders like Kintu of the Baganda or Mumbi of the Kikuyu are often elevated to the status of historical figures. Museums often have to preserve the physical documentation of cultural beliefs—without taking sides between mythology and history.

### African archives and the oral tradition

**M**useums are a special kind of physicalised archive. But how important are archives for Africa? Do we not have more serious problems of malnutrition, ignorance, disease, political instability, and general underdevelopment?

My concern in this essay is with the historical importance of something equally negative—the comparative weakness of the archival tradition in Africa and its devastating consequences for the history of our people. Africa was silent about its history; the African archival dog did not bark at crucial moments. This had serious consequences for Africa's place in international stratification.

The archival tradition may be defined, quite simply, as a cultural preoccupation with keeping records and preserving monuments, a tradition of capturing the past through preserved documentation. This means much more than establishing national archives; it means a particular propensity for recording the dates of births and marriages, collecting maps, preserving love letters, and keeping

household artefacts, as well as documenting treaties, contracts and the like. Because the archival tradition is weak in Africa, the scientific tradition became weak, our languages atrophied and so did any philosophical tradition—with ghastly consequences for our peoples across the centuries.

Why was the archival tradition weak in Africa? Firstly because most indigenous African cultures refuse to regard the past as bygone or the present as transient. The

ancestors are still with us and we ourselves will be ancestors. If the present is not transient, why bother to record it?

A related reason for the weakness of the archival tradition in African cultures is the weakness of the calendar tradition (including the discipline of the clock). Many of my fellow students in Mombasa in the 1940s did not know when they were born. The first president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, did not know when he was born.

There is a Gregorian calendar, an Islamic calendar, an Indian calendar, a Chinese calendar—but no African calendar apart from the revised Orthodox Christian calendar of Ethiopia.

The third reason for the weakness of the archival tradition in Africa is the weakness of the written word. Many African societies have only come to know the written word during the last century.

This is not to say that Africa is homogeneous. Quite apart from other differences, the continent as a whole operates within a triple heritage of culture. This triple heritage consists of indigenous, Islamic and Western traditions.

Modern archives are mainly Western in conception, and they are also Islamic to some extent. But can they be indigenised? Or are they inevitably part of the imported sections of Africa's triple heritage?

To the extent that archives until recently have been viewed almost entirely as collections of written records, the indigenous aspects of the triple heritage have not been viewed as archival material. Muslim Africa has been better endowed with written records than non-Muslim indigenous Africa. These records in Islamic societies have sometimes been in the Arabic language, but they have also sometimes been in African languages using the Arabic script.

But what is a document? Here we are mainly concerned with the written word. But there are five categories of documentation in all:

- Material documentation, such as archaeological evidence, from pottery

**Among the great cultures of the world, African civilisations have had less written records than average. For a long time this literary deficit resulted in the assumption that Africa was a continent without history.**

to Great Zimbabwe, from skeletons to coins;

- Written documentation: a mystical reverence for the symbols of literacy has conditioned our view of what constitutes archival reference itself;
- Pictorial documentation, including painting or carving on rocks;
- Sound documentation, which is in some ways the newest form of archival record.

But the oldest form of documentation is the raw memory of the human being, a capacity to “recollect in tranquillity”.

Two concepts are useful in approaching the question of archives in Africa: the concept of documentary deficit and the concept of primordial surplus. Documentary deficit concerns an apparent excess of silence in African historiography, a shortage of recognised documentation in the written and material fields.

Primordial surplus can take a variety of forms.

Here I am particularly concerned with a surplus of allegiance to primordial identities, a commitment to ethnicity or religious sectarianism.

The problem of documentation has affected Africa in two very complex ways. One is the crisis of documentary deficit in the material and written remains; the other is the crisis of primordial surplus in the area of raw human memory. The past is strongly with us. Materially, Africa has had relatively few stone monuments, few hard documents of the past. Great Zimbabwe is striking partly because of its very uniqueness.

But the crisis of the documentary deficit also extends to the area of written remains. Among the great cultures of the world, African civilisations have had less written records than average. For a long time this literary deficit resulted in the assumption that Africa was a continent without history.

Did this negative cultural image condemn Africans to centuries of marginality and

servitude? Was the slave trade partly a case of cross-cultural images? Was colonialism partly a product of cultural perceptions of racial hierarchy? Did Africa’s documentary deficit sentence the continent to the lowest stratum in the ranking order of global privilege?

Why did Europeans pick on Africans to enslave? Why did they not enslave Arabs or south Asians? Partly because the cultural distance between Europeans and Africans was deemed to be particularly wide. It was partly the relative absence of castles, cathedrals and written contracts in Africa that made the civilisational gap appear so wide.

Africa’s crisis of documentary deficit had a good deal to do with the origins of racism. Civilisations were often evaluated in terms of either concrete remains or written records. Most of Black Africa seemed to have neither.

The crisis of documentary deficit had related implications for

science and philosophy. The absence of the written word deprived much of Africa of the bounty of cumulative heresy. Africa’s oral tradition was a tradition which tended to transmit consensus rather than dissent, what was agreed upon rather than what was rejected by the establishment.

Where were Africa’s Platos and Lockes, Rousseaus and Lenins? Most of them lie in the graveyard of consensus, in the cemetery of the oral tradition. Brilliant Africans failed to surface above village life, genius was too steeped in the oral non-literate legacy of rural Africa.

Who would ever have heard of Karl Marx in the twentieth century if he had operated in a completely oral tradition in nineteenth century Europe? The written word was needed to preserve Karl Marx’s heresies in his own formulation.

But while the oral tradition is an illustration of documentary deficit in material and written remains, it may also illustrate the dynamism of raw human memory in Africa.

**Why did Europeans pick on Africans to enslave? Why did they not enslave Arabs or south Asians? Partly because the cultural distance between Europeans and Africans was deemed to be particularly wide.**

The question that arises in the twentieth century is whether that raw human memory is a case of surplus primordial documentation! Is there too much raw documentation? Are ordinary Africans remembering too much of their origins and their past? Is the past too present among us? Is the present refusing to be transient and temporary?

Since the second half of the twentieth century the most obstinate aspect of primordial surplus has been the resilience of ethnic identity. The great majority of Africans refuse to forget their primordial origins, be they Baganda or Acholi, Luo or Kikuyu, Shona or Ndebele, Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo. The resilience of ethnic identity is a reliance on documentation at the level of raw human memory, for better or for worse. Ethnicity is an archive, stacked with documents of the annals of the “tribe”, the records of community, the memory of collective identity.

This situation has had repercussions in the post-colonial period. Surplus ethnic identity has outweighed deficit class-consciousness in Africa. A Hausa peasant is a Hausa first and a peasant second when the political chips are down.

Deficit class-consciousness in Africa was compounded by deficit literary documentation. Why is it a socio-linguistic impossibility for an African to be a sophisticated Marxist without being at the same time highly westernised? One cannot be a sophisticated Marxist without exposure to the words of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and other ideological founding fathers. But these works are not available in African indigenous languages (“vernaculars”). Access to sophisticated Marxism must therefore be through a sophisticated command of a European language. A non-westernised African Marxist is, for the time being, a contradiction in terms.

In the origins of European socialism,

history was used as evidence against the past. That is what Marx and Engels meant by viewing all events as an agony of class struggle. In contrast, some African socialists have tended to view history as evidence in favour of the past. Tradition has been seen as primordial collectivism, concern for the disadvantaged and universal hospitality.

European use of written archives resulted in a view of socialism as an interruption,

sometimes as a drastic revolution, designed as a fundamental departure from the past. On the other hand, African socialism in some countries has emerged as a doctrine of continuity, a link with ancient lifestyles.

While European socialism has proclaimed a negation of the European past, African socialism has often proclaimed a reaffirmation of African ancestors. While Karl Marx at the British Museum was

using archives as allies in social revolution, African socialists later looked for archives to vindicate cultural revivalism.

But it is not just ideology and philosophy that pose questions about continuity and change. Science also needs a built-in principle of instability—a readiness to be challenged by heresy.

African science and technology were too stable. Major paradigm shifts were too rare. When it is too stable, science becomes stagnant. But was not African science unstable in another sense? Since it was taught through the oral tradition, was it not subject to variation from mouth to mouth? The answer is yes. Science passed through word of mouth is vulnerable; but this is the instability of imprecision rather than the instability of careful revision.

Those African languages that were not written were also unstable. They changed too fast. It is harder to understand a nineteenth-

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century African poem even in Kiswahili than to understand a nineteenth-century English poem. Many Africans are more eager to learn the imperial European languages than to protect indigenous languages. Linguistic patriotism is weak partly because of the weakness of the archival tradition.

What then is the new archival order for Africa? In his *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*, the English poet William Wordsworth talked about the child being father to the man. In Europe the national archive was the child of the archival tradition. The national archive was a consequence of a pre-existent cultural preoccupation with record keeping. In Africa the national archive may have to father the archival tradition or at least help that tradition become strong.

More than dusty documents are at stake. We must stop believing that the present is not temporary, that the past is still with us, even if we do nothing to preserve its records. We must learn to keep accounts, record births, marriages and deaths, preserve artefacts, keep picture albums and protect contracts.

Perhaps above all, we need not only to respect intellectual heresies, but also to create a climate where they do not perish into unrecorded oblivion. A new archival order in Africa could help change the continent fundamentally. And a world with a fundamentally different Africa cannot but be a fundamentally different world.

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### Between primitivism and gloriana

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Four processes of social memory are involved in identity-formation. As we indicated earlier, these basic processes are, quite simply, preservation, selection, elimination and invention. What is remembered is, in our sense, preserved in the memory. But it is inevitable that a selection process takes place—for the social memory will not remember every detail. Positive selection may lead to nostalgia, a desire to recapture the happier past in spirit if not to re-enact it. Negative selection by the memory, on the other hand, may lead to social or cultural

amnesia—a forgetting of a past deemed to be unhappy or in some sense inglorious.

As we mentioned, the fourth process is a re-invention of the past—believing in a past which never was. Logically there is a question as to whether this is memory at all or whether it is something else. Psychological and psychiatric literature at the level of the individual person has come to debate the issue of “false memory” in recent years—as adults have, under psychiatric therapy, claimed to “remember” being sexually abused as children by close relatives, sometimes even by their own parents. Are these authentic recollections of events that really happened in the past? Or are certain methods of psychiatric therapy guilty of implanting or creating “false memories”?

Another question that arises is whether this whole phenomenon of “false memory” is equally compelling at the collective or national level. Do societies manufacture “events” in their history that never occurred? The answer is of course in the affirmative. Cultural myth making is, at least in part, a process of creating false memories. In Rwanda and Burundi myths about the “Hemitic origins” of the Tutsi helped to create a potentially deadly caste-structure of Tutsi versus Hutu.

European imperialism in Africa played havoc with the African memory—initiating new forms of amnesia, nostalgia, and false memories. Defending themselves against European arrogance, one school of African thought emphasised that Africa before the European’s arrival had its own complex civilisations of the kind that Europeans regarded as valid and important—civilisations which produced great kings, impressive empires and elaborate technological skills. This form of cultural nostalgia might be called romantic gloriana.

On the other hand, romantic primitivism celebrates what is simple about Africa. It salutes the cattle-herder rather than the castle-builder. In the words of Aime Cesaire:

*Hooray for those who never invented anything*

*Hooray for those who never discovered*

*anything  
Hooray for joy!  
Hooray for love!  
Hooray for the pain of incarnate tears.  
My negritude [My blackness] is no tower  
and no cathedral,  
It delves into the deep red flesh of the  
soil<sup>2</sup>*

In contrast, romantic gloriana celebrates Africa's more complex achievements. It salutes the pyramids of Egypt, the towering structures of Aksum, the sunken churches of Lalibela, the brooding majesty of Great Zimbabwe, the castles of Gondar. Romantic gloriana is a tribute to Africa's empires and kingdoms, Africa's inventors and discoverers; great Shaka Zulu rather than the unknown peasant.

Both forms of Pan-African cultural nationalism were a response to European imperialism and its cultural arrogance. Europeans said that Africans were simple and invented nothing. That was an alleged fact. Europeans also said that those who were simple and invented nothing were uncivilised. That was a value judgement.

Romantic primitivism accepted Europe's alleged facts about Africa (i.e. that Africa was simple and invented nothing) but rejected Europe's valued judgement (that Africa was therefore uncivilised).

Romantic gloriana, on the other hand, rejected Europe's alleged facts about Africa (that Africa was simple and invented nothing) but seems to have accepted Europe's values (that civilisation is to be measured by complexity and invention).

The same country in Africa can produce both types of Pan-African nationalists. Senegal's Léopold Sédar Senghor has been a major thinker and poet in the negritude school. Negritude is associated with romantic primitivism. Senghor's most hotly debated statement is:

*"Emotion is black...Reason is Greek."*

On the other hand, the late Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal's renaissance man who died in 1986, belonged more to the gloriana school.<sup>3</sup> He spent much of his life demonstrating Africa's contributions to global civilisation. And he was most emphatic that the civilisation of pharaonic Egypt was a black civilisation. This was all in the grand Pan-African tradition of romantic gloriana.

What of the reality of Africa? It was a fusion of the simple and the complex, the cattle-herder and the castle-builder. It was more than romantic primitivism and romantic gloriana. Real Pan-Africanism must go beyond the twin stimuli of poetry and imperialism. Pan-Africanism is based on a positive false memory—that Africa was divided by colonialism and was previously one.

Pan-Africanism as a false memory of ancestral one-ness has resulted today in such organisations as the African Union and its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity. In East Africa the positive false memory of precolonial African one-ness has been one of the impulses behind the quest for a postcolonial East African Community.

Pan-Africanism as cultural integration will probably be led by East Africa with its good fortune of a region-wide indigenous language—the role of Kiswahili binding Tanzania, Kenya, to some extent Uganda, Somalia,

and potentially Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Northern Mozambique and Malawi are also feeling Swahili influence. A shared language is an asset, for democratisation and for regional integration.

Selective memory has emphasised the Bantu origins of Kiswahili and minimised its association with Islamic and Arab ancestry. This selective memory has been helped by the fact that the language has in any case become increasingly Africanised further.

Kiswahili is spoken by more people than

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any other indigenous language of Africa. It already has over one hundred million speakers. Kiswahili is expanding more rapidly than any other lingua franca on the continent.

Pan-Africanism of political integration will probably be led by North Africa. There is already a kind of economic cooperation fraternity binding five countries—Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania. Although they have centuries of real shared memories, the economic cooperation has been limping along. However, Egypt has now expressed an interest in joining this movement towards greater North African regional integration. The sub-region is still a long way from political integration, but it is the best placed in Africa for such an adventure—since it shares a religion (Islam), a language (Arabic), a culture (Arabo-Berber) and a substantial shared history across centuries.

Although Pan-Africanism is ultimately based on the false memory that Africa was one before imperialism divided it, Africa needs Pan-Africanism if it is to escape its marginalisation in the global system. Pan-Africanism may be a false memory, but it is not a false hope. Museums all over Africa are likely to be called upon to reinforce Africa's false memory that it was once united before European colonisation.

What about the false memories of Europe? Have these impacted upon the fate and fortunes of Africa? They probably have in a variety of ways, but one of the most recent debates concerns the place of ancient Greece in European civilisation, on the one hand, and the place of ancient Egypt in Africa's postcolonial self-definition. While European imperialism once scrambled for Africa, African cultural nationalism has often scrambled for ancient Egypt. Egyptology is the most successful archival and museum culture on the African continent. How does Egyptology relate to Europe's scramble for classical Greece?

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## Black Athena and false memory

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Was ancient Greece itself as a civilisation kidnapped by Northern and Western Europeans and incorporated into their own heritage?

This section of the paper is partly based on the concept and metaphor of plagiarism in the history of civilisation. We define macro-plagiarism as a massive borrowing by one civilisation from another in a manner that deliberately obscures origins and denies acknowledgment and attribution. We define micro-plagiarism as a similar borrowing—but by one individual from another. In the ethics of the contemporary world, plagiarism is more the stealing of the words of another—rather than the stealing of the ideas of another. Hijacking ideas is almost the name of the game in the ethics of Western scholarship!

Martin Luther King Jr has been accused of plagiarising from a white student called Jack Boozer—who later became a professor at Emory University in Atlanta. In our terms the charge against King is a case of alleged micro-plagiarism.

The book *Black Athena* by Martin Bernal, on the other hand, accuses nineteenth century Europe of having perpetrated a deception, which amounted to a deliberate denial of credit to Egyptians and Semites for the cultural miracle of ancient Greece. In our terms, Martin Bernal—a professor of Government at Cornell University, and a former Fellow of King's College, Cambridge—has levelled the serious charge of macro-plagiarism on twentieth century Western civilisation itself. Did Europe scramble for ancient Greece before it scrambled for nineteenth century Africa?

Martin Bernal's thesis is not that ancient Greece plagiarised from other Mediterranean cultures and deliberately withheld attribution. Bernal's argument is that the failure of attribution is much more recent—going back to the first half of the 19th century AD. According to Bernal, the Greeks themselves basically understood that their culture had

arisen “as the result of colonisation, around 1500 BC, by Egyptians and Phoenicians who had civilised the native inhabitants.” Bernal continues, “Furthermore, Greeks had continued to borrow heavily from Near Eastern cultures.”<sup>4</sup> Archives and museums have documented this process.

Bernal’s argument goes on to suggest that it was the rise of racial theories in the nineteenth century which sought to purge ancient Greece of both African and Semitic influences. New myths and new “memories” were being manufactured.

In Bernal’s words:

*For 18th- and 19th-century Romantics and racists [in Europe] it was simply intolerable for Greece, which was seen not merely as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood, to have been the result of the mixture of native Europeans and colonising Africans and Semites. Therefore the Ancient model had to be overthrown and replaced by something more acceptable.*<sup>5</sup>

It is worth remembering that Martin Bernal is not of course a black nationalist. He is a white Jew who was originally trained in the Chinese language and civilisation, and later learnt several of the relevant Semitic and other languages. So independent of African nationalistic arguments is Bernal’s thesis that Cheikh Anta Diop, the leading African scholar on “Black Egyptianism”, is hardly mentioned at all in Volume I. Diop gets a mere casual reference in passing on page 436 of Volume I. (Ali Mazrui gets a similar passing reference on the same page.)

There emerged then the “Aryan model” of the origins of the Greek miracle. In our terms a false memory came into being. This model comes up with an invasion that had not been reported in ancient Greek tradition—an invasion from the north, which had overwhelmed the “Aegean” and “Pre-Hellenic” culture. Under the Aryan model, Greek civilisation emerged out of a synthesis of Indo-European Hellenes and their indigenous subjects.

Martin Bernal prefers the Ancient

model—but revises it to accommodate an Indo-European component alongside Semitic and African influences. He concedes the invasion but accommodates it in the original Mediterranean Ancient model.

Bernal’s evidence includes language:

*It is generally agreed that the Greek language was formed during the 17th and 16th centuries BC. Its Indo-European structure and lexicon are combined with a non-Indo-European vocabulary of sophistication. I am convinced that much of the latter may be plausibly derived from Egyptian and West Semitic [linguistic sources].*<sup>6</sup>

Bernal also acknowledges the Africanness of Egyptian civilisation and thus helps to fuel or confirm romantic gloriana in the rest of Africa. As he put it, “Egyptian civilisation is clearly based on the rich Predynastic cultures of Upper Egypt and Nubia whose African origin is uncontested.... The succession of Upper Egyptian black pharaohs sharing Menthorpe had as their divine patron the hawk and bull god Mntw or Monto. It is during the same century that the Cretan palaces were established and one finds the beginnings there of the bull-cult which appears on the walls of the palaces and was central to Greek mythology about King Minos and Crete. It would therefore seem plausible to suppose that the Cretan developments directly or indirectly reflected the rise of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom.”<sup>7</sup> Museums and archives of the Nile continue to unfold the Egypto-Atheneum saga.

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## Africanising the Semites

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**B**asically, the arguments in the whole debate are reducible to the following questions:

- (a) What was the extent of Egyptian influence on the civilisation of ancient Greece?
- (b) What was the extent of Semitic influence on ancient Greece?
- (c) To what extent was Egyptian civilisation itself African?
- (d) To what extent was the Semitic influence itself African?

It should be remembered that Semitic languages are part of the Afroasiatic heritage. Semitic languages include not just Arabic and Hebrew—but also such Ethiopian languages as Amharic and Tigrinya.

By the 21st century it was clear that in terms of global distribution the most successful Semitic language is Arabic. In terms of global distribution the most successful Semitic religion is Christianity by our day. In terms of per capita achievement the most successful Semitic people by our day have been the Jews.

But at the time of ancient Greece the most relevant Semitic influences were the Phoenicians and other Western Semites. Martin Bernal argues that up to a quarter of the ancient Greek vocabulary could be traced to Semitic origins. Bernal was astonished to discover that Hebrew and Phoenician were mutually intelligible.

Further study convinced Martin Bernal that one out of every five words of ancient Greek vocabulary could be traced to Egypt. “Egypt had by far the greatest civilisation in the East Mediterranean during the millennia in which Greece was formed. Greek writers had written at length about their debts to Egyptian religion and other aspects of culture.”<sup>8</sup>

Bernal argues that it was the rise of both anti-Semitism and anti-Africanism that resulted in the Aryan explanation of the origins of the Greek Miracle. Not the greening of America, but the whitening of Greece was well and truly under way. A most astonishing act of macro-plagiarism entered the world scene. Europe re-defined itself. A false memory of immense implications was born. Did it significantly contribute to Europe’s arrogance towards African cultures and other non-Western traditions? Let us look more closely at European tensions between myth and history, between the culture of letters and the culture of legends.

## How Greece was Europeanised

How was the plagiarism done? First, by defining Europe in such a manner that Greece became part of Europe. And secondly, by denying the ancient Greek debt to dynastic Egypt. Greece was kidnapped and made part of European civilisation and plagiarism was perpetrated by denying any significant stimulus from Africa.

The distinction between southern Europe and northern Africa may be of recent fabrication. The great American Africanist, Melville Herskovits, reminded us how the Geographer Royal of France—writing in 1656—described Africa as a “peninsula so large that it comprises the third part, and this the most southerly of our [European] continent.”<sup>9</sup>

For centuries before that, the cultures of North Africa were much closer to the cultures of Southern Europe than the culture of ancient Greece was to the more primitive traditions of the Anglo-Saxons. The legacy of *Eurafrica* went back not only to Carthage but also to the conquering links between Egyptian and Hellenistic colonisation. As the historians R.R. Palmer and Joel Colton have put it:

**“Egypt had by far the greatest civilisation in the East Mediterranean during the millennia in which Greece was formed. Greek writers had written at length about their debts to Egyptian religion and other aspects of culture.”**

*There was really no Europe in ancient times. In the Roman Empire we may see a Mediterranean world, or even a West and an East in the Latin and Greek portions. But the West included parts of Africa as well as Europe.*<sup>10</sup>

With the rising self-confidence of the northern and western Europeans from the 17th century onwards, western Europe’s own identification with the legacies of both ancient Greece and the Roman Empire became part of a new intellectual chauvinism. The false memory of the classics was soon to feed into this new arrogance.

With the emergence of the new racism,

many believed that the torch of civilisation had been passed to a new generation of Europeans.

In his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford in December 1841 Thomas Arnold gave a new lease of life to the ancient idea of a moving centre of civilisation. Arnold argued that the history of civilisation was a history of a series of creative races, each of which made its impact and then sank into oblivion, leaving the heritage to a greater successor. What the Greeks passed on to the Romans, the Romans bequeathed in turn to the Germanic race. And of that race the greatest civilising nation was England.<sup>11</sup>

Lord Lugard, one of Britain's greatest colonial administrators and imperial theoreticians, shared the vision of Britain as a successor to Rome. In his book *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, Lugard asserted that Roman imperialism helped to transform the inhabitants of the British Isles into a civilised nation. Those islands then became a civilising nation in their own right. To use Lugard's own words:

*As Roman imperialism...led the wild barbarians of these islands of Britain along the path of progress, so in Africa to day we are repaying the debt, and bringing to the dark places of the earth...the torch of culture and progress.*<sup>12</sup>

The redefinition of the relationship between Greece and Egypt did therefore definitely contribute to European cultural and imperial arrogance. Did it also make Africans eager to see parallels between some of their own cultures and those of ancient Greece? Was there a danger of new false memories in Africa reflecting Europe's infatuation with Greece?

Cultural congruence or similarity between Africa and ancient Greece includes the Yoruba pantheon in relation to the Greek pantheon. As Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Nobel Laureate, has put it in his book *Myth, Literature and the African world*:

*Since the resemblance of the Greek pantheon to the Yoruba is often remarked upon, leading even in some instances of strong scholarly nerves to 'conclusive*

*evidence' for the thesis that the Yoruba religion is derived from the Greek, it is instructive to point out a fundamental contrast .... That Greek religion shows persuasive parallels with...the Yoruba is by no means denied; the Delphic Oracle and the Ifa Corpus of the Yoruba are fascinating instances of one such structural parallel (pp. 13-14).*<sup>13</sup>

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## Conclusion

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If plagiarism is a kind of imitation, Soyinka was probably aware of its positive as well as negative roles in history. After all, it was Aristotle who argued a long time ago:

*Imitation is natural to man from childhood; he differs from other animals in that he is the most imitative; the first things he learns come to him through imitation. Then, too, all men take pleasure in imitative representations. Actual experience gives proof of this... If a man does not know the original, the imitation as such gives him no pleasure; his pleasure is then derived from its workmanship; its colour, or some similar reason.*<sup>14</sup>

Horace calls upon us as follows:

*Either follow tradition or else in what you invent be consistent... In publicly known matters, you will be able to achieve originality if you do not translate word for word, not jump into a narrow imitative groove, from which both fear and the rules followed in the given work prevent your escape.*<sup>15</sup>

The Greeks themselves were not afraid of imitation. They were not afraid of borrowing from neighbouring civilisations—and saying so in their own ancient model of Levantine interaction.

If Martin Bernal is correct, European plagiarism from the Semites and the Egyptians became malignant when it drew inspiration from malignant racism. By seeking to deny the forces of cultural synthesis, Europe attempted to deny the quest for the universal.

More than a quarter of a century before Bernal's *Black Athena* a Ghanaian intellectual

wrote a simple verse. Immanuel Wallerstein used the poem as the opening lines of his book, *Africa: The Politics of Independence*, published in 1961. *Black Athena* was first published in 1987. And yet the Ghanaian's poem was a succinct summary of one of the central theses of *Black Athena*. Michael Dei-Anang wrote the following lines:

*Dark Africa?*

*Who nursed the doubtful child of civilisation,*

*On the wand'ring banks of life-giving Nile,*


*And gave the teeming nations of the West,*

*A Grecian gift?*

Did Martin Bernal plagiarise from Michael Dei-Anang? Of course not. But if he did, this is a case of benevolent plagiarism. A European Jewish scholar has breathed new evidence in support of an old poem by a Ghanaian intellectual. This may even be a case of cultural convergence—when more than the twain do meet—and the quest for the universal moves one more step forward.

How human groups identify themselves is partly a matter of cultural memory. We have tried to show that memories can be manipulated by changing intellectual or historical circumstances. Others have raised the issue whether “tribal” identities in Africa are a heritage from antiquity or whether they were created by the policies of European colonial masters. Are new “tribal” identities being created in post-colonial Africa? Are new memories being manufactured? Are new “tribes” being born in such countries as Uganda and Ethiopia in this 21st century? Are we witnessing more genuine hidden memories of self-awareness being reactivated? Or are they new ethnic definitions being invented?

We have tried to demonstrate that the process of Westernisation in Africa has sometimes created cultural amnesia, as Africans have sought to imitate the West at the expense of their traditions. But Western cultural arrogance has also produced African cultural nostalgia, as nationalists have attempted to idealise the African past.



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Romantic primitivism in Africa celebrates cultures which “never built a tower or a cathedral”. Romantic gloriana salutes the sunken churches of Lalibela in Ethiopia, the ancient walls of Great Zimbabwe, and the great pyramids of Egypt. Romantic primitivism accepts Western “facts” about Africa (that Africa did not build towers or invent new things) but rejects Western values (that Africa was therefore “uncivilised”). Romantic gloriana contradicts Western “facts” about Africa (by demonstrating the constructional and inventive side of Africa) but accepts Western values (that civilisation consists of complex structures and monumentalist cultures). Both schools of cultural nostalgia have been influential in philosophy and literature. After all, was the Queen of Sheba Ethiopian or South Arabian?

These issues are also part of Africa’s crisis of identity—which has produced both poetry and war, both art and anguish. Pan-Africanism was born out of the false memory of a pre-colonial united Africa, later divided by imperialism. This Pan-African false memory is positive. Within it there may lie the seeds of Africa’s economic and political salvation. Should museums reinforce the false memory of pre-colonial African one-ness?

We are back to Ernest Renan’s argument that the secret of nation-building is to get one’s history wrong. Similarly the secret of a continental union may one day lie in a false memory.

#### About the Author

Ali Mazrui is one of Kenya’s most distinguished sons. Apart from being Director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies and Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at Binghamton State University of New York, USA, he is the Albert Luthuli Professor-at-Large at the University of Jos in Nigeria, the Andrew D. White Professor-at-Large Emeritus and Senior Scholar in Africana Studies at Cornell University in New York, and also—closer to home—the Chancellor of Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology in Nairobi, Kenya.

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# LAMU

Cynthia Salvadori



## Is Kenya's first and only cultural World Heritage Site in danger of being deleted from the list?

**In 2001** after several years of lobbying by the National Museums of Kenya, UNESCO declared the Old Town of Lamu to be the country's first (and to date only) cultural World Heritage Site. The editor of *Kenya Past and Present* wrote optimistically in the 2002 issue, "Lamu's addition to the World Heritage List should help to keep its cultural and religious values intact as it enters the modern world".

But it took another year for the news to officially reach Lamu, as proclaimed by the shiny sign at the end of the jetty.

LAMU WORLD HERITAGE SITE  
officially launched by  
H.E. the Vice-President and Minister for  
Home Affairs Hon. Moody Awori  
EBS, MP on 16.12.2003

This delay typifies the situation. In late 2005 I spent almost a month in Lamu investigating what impact the listing has had on the town and it so far seems minimal.

As the museum had been instrumental in getting Lamu listed, I went there first. The curator, a Lamuan himself, told me about its various plans and gave me a preview of the glossy new brochure and website about to be opened. But the museum shop, which everyone has to enter to buy their ticket, was still bare of almost everything but dust, hardly any books, not a single one about Lamu.

I then began talking with the locals. Of course the relevant officials and upper echelons in the tourist business know about Lamu being a World Heritage Site and are seriously concerned, one way or another. But despite the official launching and a formal meeting with town elders, the ordinary Lamuan hasn't a clue about their town being a

Lamu waterfront: Despite the changes, life goes on much as it always has, with dhows tied up at the quay, mangrove *boriti* poles waiting to be loaded, a resident peacefully embroidering a kofia cap. Some inappropriate development has taken place (including the County Council offices themselves) but now Lamu is a World Heritage Site, it hopefully will be contained; certainly the latest waterfront hotel built is so elegantly discreet that I walked right by it.

World Heritage Site, not even the ticket-seller and the librarian in the museum itself, let alone the man/woman on the proverbial street.

At the same time I was talking with tourists. The town was so swarming with them I could hardly believe my eyes. Over the past decades, tourism has become the mainstay of Lamu's economy, and when it fell off drastically due to the American advisory against travelling to Kenya, the town was utterly depressed for years. Now, despite the American government's refusal to lift its advisory, tourists are again coming by the planeload to Kenya, hundreds to Lamu. The hoteliers, restaurateurs, dhow owners and beach boys (the most courteous on the whole coast) are beaming from ear to ear. And so are the tourists, who love it all.

But of those I questioned, hardly a quarter knew Lamu was a World Heritage Site, and in no case had it been a deciding factor in their coming here; almost all came because friends had praised it, a few because they had read about it.

Yes, some tourists complained the town was rather dirty. The picturesque narrow streets are littered with donkey droppings (which are no problem, they quickly dry and disintegrate), and plastic trash (which is a serious problem, not just unsightly, for it clogs the open drains). At high tide the waterfront is truly enchanting with all the dhows tethered

Donkeys equipped with large panniers woven from coconut-palm fronds provide most of the transport in Lamu, carrying everything from building materials to *madafu* (green coconuts). Some tourists and expat residents complain about the donkey droppings on the streets, to the extent that at one point the idea of putting nappies on the donkeys was seriously mooted. Yet these are the very people who delight in the fact that there is no motorised traffic in the town, no polluting petrol fumes.

there. At low tide it is all too obviously the town's traditional rubbish dump. Many people, not only the County Council, have been trying various clean-up programmes, but the residents persist in throwing litter on the streets. The squalor is something the overlanders, who by simple word of mouth made Lamu internationally popular back in the 70s, took in their stride. Now that Lamu is being advertised as a World Heritage Site with stunning photographs that make it appear pristine, tourists are understandably going to have higher expectations.

#### Electricity cuts

Some tourists were put out by the daily electricity cuts. The expensive foreign-owned waterfront hotels have their own generators, but the many lesser lodgings have to make do with hurricane lamps and sometimes water in buckets. Even four years after being declared a World Heritage Site and when the hoped-for influx of tourists has actually happened, the powers-that-be have still not sorted out the town's power; the noisy old generators are constantly breaking down and the long-planned construction of an entirely new generating plant has not even got off the planning boards. So the power cuts are giving the well-financed foreign-owned hotels an advantage at the expense of the local ones. The people who are really complaining are the owners of the local restaurants catering to tourists, who desperately need reliable refrigeration. And these locals are the very people whom tourism is meant to benefit.

However, unsightly unhygienic rubbish and frustrating power cuts have long been part of life in Lamu. There are new things happening that are changing Lamu itself, changing what got it listed as a World Heritage Site in the first place.

#### Motorised traffic

A significant part of Lamu's popular claim to fame, and a major reason why it was listed as a World Heritage Site, is that it was a town without any motorised traffic. As far back as 1976, clause 2.3 of the Proposed Lamu Planning Policies relevant to Zone 1, 'which includes the area of the Old Town plus the



seafront from the abattoir to the EAP & L generators' stated "There is to be a complete prohibition of vehicular traffic, including motorcycles and bicycles but excluding handcarts, in the Zone". When an up-country DC imported a Land Rover in which to have his august personage chauffeured between home and office, locals and tourists just laughed. And no one objected when several years ago the County Council acquired a small tractor and trailer to collect the rubbish from the overflowing waterfront tips. This year the English-supported Donkey Sanctuary brought in a Suzuki 'ambulance' but although parked by the Sanctuary on the waterfront, it is only used inland. More serious concerns are the several private motorbikes that roar up and down the waterfront, along with speeding bicycles.\* When I asked the County Council about laws concerning vehicles in the town, the answer was one word: 'ambiguous'. They intend to draft a by-law restricting them, but getting by-laws passed takes time, and vested interests have ways of thwarting them.

#### **Buying up of old houses**

There is also something less obvious but equally serious going on that is changing Lamu's very character. This is the sudden massive buying up of old houses within the World Heritage Site by foreigners.

During the colonial era and subsequent decades Lamu became home to a handful of retired colonial officials and a few other Europeans, both Kenyan and expatriate. They were people seriously appreciative of Lamu's history, art and architecture, and they bought and restored some of the astonishingly beautiful houses that made Lamu so justly famous, that have now made it a World Heritage Site.

Old houses are notoriously expensive to maintain, and in Lamu the situation is exacerbated by traditional laws of inheritance which result in a single building being owned by dozens of family members, few of whom are interested in going to the expense of upkeep. Most of the fine old houses were



Privacy is a major consideration in traditional Lamu architecture, to the extent that a number of houses are linked by unique pedestrian flyovers, called *wikio*, which enable women to visit their neighbours without having to go down and up stairs, out into public space.

derelict, many turned into low-rent tenements, which only hastened their decline. A few were saved by interested local Europeans, and interest was aroused.

As a result of studies sponsored by the National Museums of Kenya and UNESCO (the first by Ghaidan in the 70s, the second by Siravo and Pulver in the 80s), the conservation of Lamu's Old Town became a serious issue, and eventually the EU was persuaded to contribute financially. But to qualify for EU funding, the owner(s) of a building had to show their commitment by putting up 25% of the cost. Good restoration is appallingly expensive and very few locals have that sort of money; most of the 20 or so houses that have been restored with EU funds are owned by outsiders. And of course there are allegations of corruption.

Now, suddenly, foreigners who are totally alien to Kenya have been flocking into Lamu, paying wildly inflated prices for dilapidated old buildings which the owners are all too delighted to get rid of. They can command so much money that even when divided, the various members can build new single-storey stone houses on the periphery of the town and/or set themselves up in business in Mombasa.

\* When I returned in April 2006 to check on the situation, I found the number of motorbikes had increased and now they were even roaring around within the town; one returning tourist I talked with said she was "enraged".

Shela waterfront: A monstrous hotel totally out of proportion to Shela village dominates the small fishermen's beach and completely blocks the view and the breeze for all the houses behind. This was the structure as of February 2002. It has been abandoned and now stands as a gross ruin—an unfortunately perfect example of how failure to enforce building codes has wrecked an area just a few kilometres away from the World Heritage Site.

No one begrudges the people of Lamu a chance to make such splendid profits. And a whole fleet of middlemen are taking their tidy cut too. What is of concern is the speculation by the buyers themselves. The stories of one vastly powerful foreigner—the one person who, despite my repeated requests for an interview, refused to talk with me—now owning vast numbers of properties are too precise to be discounted as rumours.

It is the sheer number of sales that is causing the most concern not only to UNESCO but also to some locals, both official and private. As one man put it, "*sasa tutakuwa wageni kwetu*" (now we are going to be strangers in our own place). Some people are proposing that the sale of houses be halted and replaced by a system of long leases. Some vested interests, of course, are dead against this. But whether bought or leased, many houses in Lamu are ending up in European hands. And if foreigners predominate (as they now do in nearby Shela), Lamu will no longer be a Swahili town—which is the very reason it was declared a World Heritage Site.

Unlike the excessively wealthy foreigners with holiday homes in Shela (who are there simply because it happens to be the *in* place to

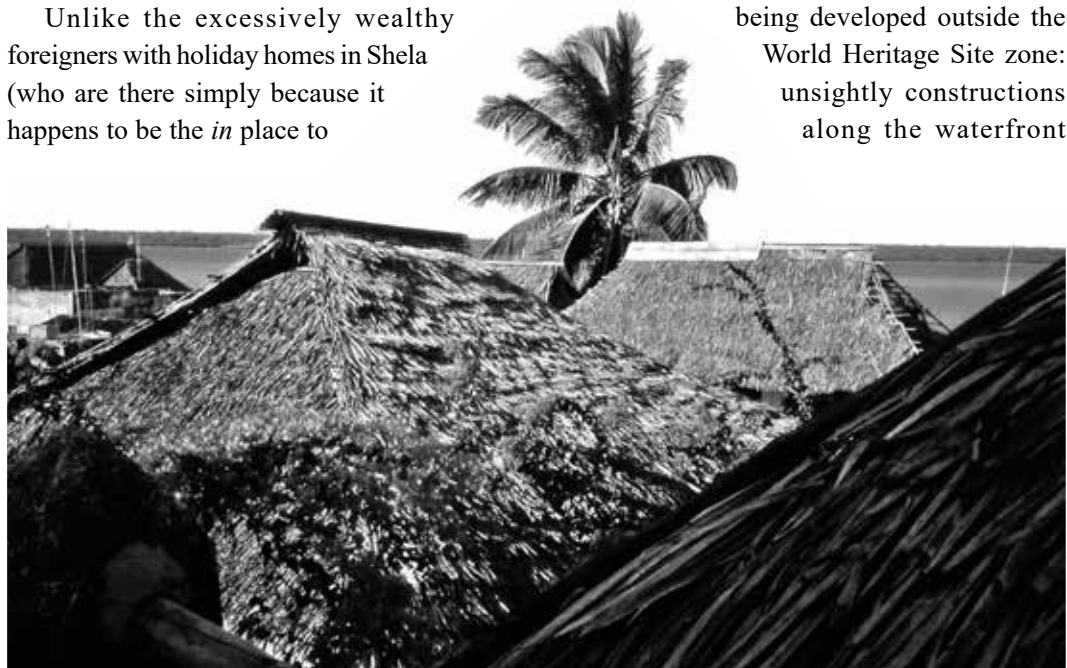


be seen), most of the people buying in Lamu do so because they have an appreciation for the town's unique architecture and culture. Nevertheless, some are as guilty as the worst entrepreneurs of contravening the ambiguous and poorly enforced building regulations, adding fourth and even fifth storeys to get their view of the channel, thereby blocking that of their neighbours, and totally changing the roofscape. An advantage of Lamu having been listed as a World Heritage Site is that now the relevant officials have more authority to control such building—if they have the will to exert it.

**Unsightly construction**

But the real threat to Lamu comes not from so many foreigners buying old houses for their personal pleasure. It comes from the foreign-financed tourist facilities being developed outside the World Heritage Site zone: unsightly constructions along the waterfront

The view is a major consideration for most Europeans living in Lamu, with the result that people have not merely restored, renovated and remodelled old houses but have been adding a third, sometimes a fourth, storey to the traditional two-storeyed buildings. The European neighbour behind then retaliates, building even higher, so some houses are now five storeys high. Traditional building practice calls for houses to be no higher than the coconut trees.



to Shela and across the channel on Manda, a tourist park planned for the pristine beach beyond Shela—all of which involve accusations and counter-accusations of land-grabbing and blatant flouting of Kenya’s hard-fought-for environmental regulations, with of course the connivance of well-placed officials and powerful locals.

Such inappropriate development will certainly increase if oil is discovered close offshore, which would bring in large numbers of workers wanting ‘amusement’. The whole area could become another Malindi, the World Heritage Site reduced to an anachronistic scrap in its midst.

An even more disturbing threat comes from the presence of American marines now regularly stationed at the Kenyan Navy base at Magongoni, on the mainland just north of Lamu Island. Although the United States is trying to ‘win the hearts’ of Lamuans with well publicised civic projects (e.g. the embassy sponsors the annual Lamu Cultural Festival and some handcrafts have conspicuous labels ‘Donated by the people of America through the ambassador’s fund’, while polite young marines recently built a ten-classroom school on neighbouring Pate Island), it remains a disconcerting fact that back in history when Lamu and the other city-states of the archipelago found themselves caught in the crossfire for dominion between the Muslim Turks and the Christian Portuguese they were often reduced to rubble.

### Deleted?

Or Lamu might simply get deleted. Foreseeing it could happen that a “property has deteriorated to the extent that it has lost those characteristics which determined its inclusion in the World Heritage List”, UNESCO inserted a clause in its Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention for the “deletion of properties from the World Heritage List”.

### PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR



Old carved doors on Lamu’s main street, with two of the town’s traditional residents—cats descended from those of ancient Egypt. Complaints about their numbers by some Europeans and concern for their welfare by others has led to several efforts to cut down their numbers and improve their health. The first two culling and neutering programmes ran with good intentions but poor public relations by the KSPCA and VSPA engendered so much local hostility that they folded. Last year a European in Nairobi set up an Animal Welfare Clinic staffed with a vet from Mombasa, and his services seem to be more appreciated. But although the culling seems to have stopped there is a danger that the neutering will result in the extinction of this unique breed of cat that is so much part of the Lamu scene.

#### About the Author

Cynthia Salvadori is a Kenya-based historian and anthropologist whose connection with Lamu goes back well over a century; her mother’s uncle-in-law John Haggard was posted as Britain’s first vice consul in Lamu in 1884/5 (and the stories he told inspired his brother Rider’s classics such as *King Solomon’s Mines*). She has been visiting Lamu almost annually since 1971 and is currently writing a book about the archipelago, past and present.

# Do we need nature?

Bryan Harris



**What** a question! One that only a dumb human could ask. You know, I'd really like to meet the person who asked that and to measure the width of his or her forehead because I bet I'd find a match with their semi-primate ancestors who thousands of years ago passed through these self-same plains that are home to me today. You see I am a zebra and I've just about had enough of the human race. I mean who is the 'we'? That arrogant collection of bipeds that consider the world their domain to do with as they wish? What about 'us'? I know they think that we are just some peculiar offshoot of the horse family who wear

funny jerseys. Gee, (pun intended), I cannot begin to recall just how many times I've overheard some safari-booted, bush-jacketed, know-all tour guide telling his captive audience crammed into a mini-bus here on the Athi Plains on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya's capital city, that each of us has a distinctive pattern of markings with the result that our stripes are as individual as fingerprints are to humans, blah, blah, blah. Then, nine times out of ten, the youngest member of the party will ask whether the stripes are black on white or vice-versa and which English football

team we play for. Cheap laugh, Newcastle United, ha, ha, ha, or rather, hee-haw. Then comes the serious bit when, with sudden gravitas, the party has to endure a dose of the current (human) thinking about the crucial importance of nature in the scheme of things and how it must be preserved at all costs. The sheer hypocrisy of this last point always induces in me a bray or at least a snort and a bucking of my back legs which the inhabitants of the mini-bus invariably misinterpret as playfulness and a cue for another snapshot, and why? I'll tell you why, because no more than a few kilometres as the crow flies from this very spot lies Kenya's most popular restaurant beloved of tourists, air crews and do-gooders of all persuasions. And what is its name and claim to fame? Well it's the Carnivore Restaurant known around the world for its cuts from wild animals with zebra (of course) and crocodile topping the bill of fare! Yes, these are the same people who roundly condemn poaching, and travel thousands of miles to witness nature in its pristine state and the preservation of "our wildlife heritage" etc etc, but are blissfully unaware of the irony of the situation when they sit down to have one of us for dinner a few hours later. All this going on in a country that banned all forms of hunting in 1973 and still does. Yes indeed.

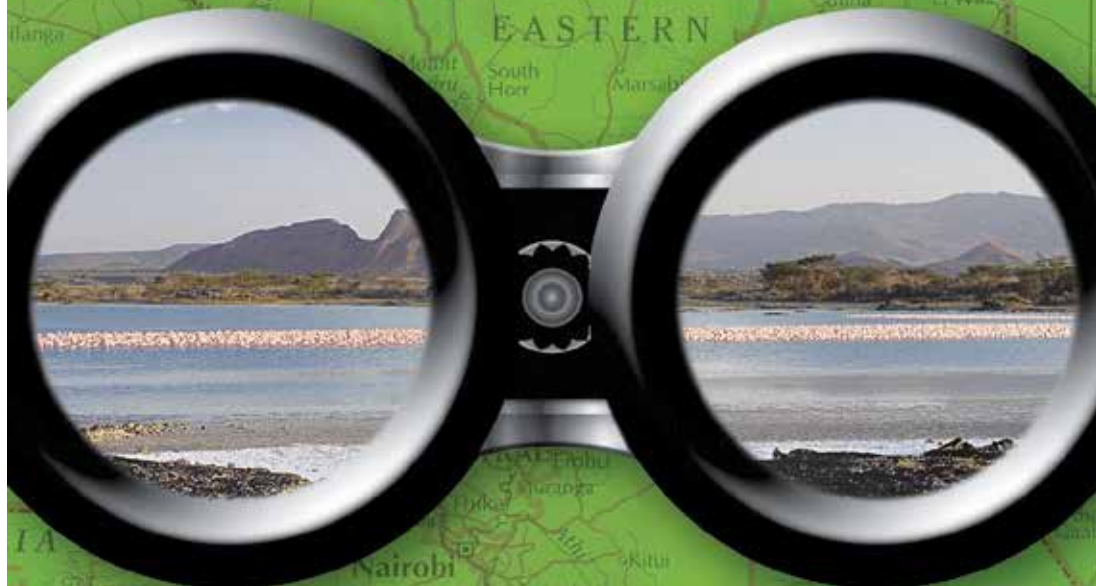
**C**oming down to earth somewhat, it seems there's probably room enough for all of us on the planet, but only so long as the non-human species remember their

**This article was written in 2005 for an essay competition titled "Do we need nature", sponsored by Shell and The Economist magazine.**

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place and avoid getting in the way when it comes to what passes for progress and development. In other words, do not get in the way of the money train. That you are here at all came about pretty much by accident, motivated by a quest for new land and a burgeoning population in your places of origin. First came the African migrations during which the Bantu people from the west coast settled in the fertile parts of what are today Uganda and Kenya, shunning the dry plains and rolling savannahs thereby leaving us pretty much alone as we had been for millions of years. Then from the north came the nomadic pastoralists, known as nilotics driving their cattle, sheep and goats before them, bringing diseases and taking much of our grazing as if by right. Both of these setbacks we could bear, but much later, when the Europeans came with their zest for killing anything on four legs, whether they wanted to eat it or not, is when the catastrophe truly began. They brought civilisation and nothing can destroy a natural habitat quite as fast and as effectively as civilisation. Put quite simply, civilised (and I use the word advisedly) man thinks he requires a plaything to relieve the stresses and strains of everyday life and, having outgrown the train set or the Barbie doll, what better place to romp around, let off steam, recharge the batteries, than the great outdoors in the belief that he has fallen upon a major discovery and that this newfound paradise was created expressly for him? Oh yes, when it comes to matters of nature, man's sensitivity runs the whole gamut from A to B!

**W**e animals (and here I speak even for the wildebeests who are a bit, you know, well, slightly slow) would be a lot less cynical about humankind's concern with nature were it not just so suddenly fashionable, especially in the so-called developed world where it is the flavour of the moment. And then we have to wonder whether this fad (sorry,

newfound awareness) takes account of our welfare or is predominantly about your craving somehow to re-enact the ideal of the fearless pioneer on a self-appointed mission to bring civilised values to what was perceived to be nothing but a savage and largely empty wilderness. If we enter into the scheme of things at all, it's usually a case of "your interests are fine so long as they don't mess with ours".

**T**ake my own situation here on the Athi Plains. Once upon a time the park was fenced only on three sides leaving us free to embark on our twice yearly migration to and from the Masai Mara and the Serengeti in search of fresh grass, but for some years the Kitengela corridor has been virtually closed off and we now find ourselves sealed inside a ring of barbed wire and electric fencing with nowhere to go. Some of us just cannot take it and make a break for freedom whereupon we become an immediate nuisance to the humans who live alongside the park boundaries who duly exact a swift and terrible retribution using snares and even the gun. You see Kenya's many national parks and reserves (reserves are places where wildlife and humans are supposed to exist alongside each other in harmony) are home to a mere 20% of all the country's fauna. That's right, over three-quarters of wild animals have to fight for survival in areas which give priority to the needs of man and his burgeoning herds of domesticated cattle, sheep and goats, none of which are indigenous to Africa by the way, with the result that very large areas are denuded of grass and natural bush land, with desertification the inevitable and only certain outcome.

**Y**ou are probably thinking that I am being horribly antagonistic to the human race with a grudge to bear. Not so. We animals managed to live alongside the original human inhabitants of these plains in a reasonable state of coexistence for a very long time indeed and yes, maybe it was because there were so many of us and so few of you. I mean in the course

of a year, I don't suppose we lost half as many of our number to human predation as to crocodiles, so we could live with that. Moreover, I am secretly pleased to say that the human race has invariably shown a preference for meat from the antelope family (Thompson's gazelle, impala, wildebeest, et al), and so we were left pretty much alone, being looked on as horsey and, although we are the favourite prey of lions, they are just so unbelievably lazy and inefficient, that even when they swarmed over this land, our numbers were barely affected.

**I** am told that my ancestors even felt some sympathy for the early humans, being as they were a pretty stunted bunch usually huddled together for warmth with not a stitch between them.

Fairly brainless too by all accounts (just consider that massive brow ridge which is a right giveaway), so much so that even wildebeest were more than a match for them and so, as often as not, they had to rely on the good fortune to stumble on a kill which they had to share with jackals and vultures. How undignified! No wonder they had to evolve pretty fast and even then it must have been blind luck that they, Homo so-called-sapiens, managed to survive when much harder species such as the Neanderthals and other palaeolithic sub-species simply fell by nature's wayside. So, Homo sapiens ipso facto equals intelligent being equals the ultimate creation? Now isn't that an example if ever there was one of mankind's vanity? Having scabbled around for millions of years at the bottom of every pecking order, suddenly—in the winking of an eye in terms of eternity—you emerge as top dog with the world as your oyster to do with as you will and demanding subordination on every front. Nature meant nothing to you in

Do we need humans?



those carefree days of irresponsibility when whole species could be wiped out in a decade or two without a backward glance. I'll grant it does say something about your newfound efficiency though when once again, a few thousand years ago, you were on the latest brink of extinction with poor hunting skills and unable to cope with the ice ages that occasionally swept the planet, you suddenly happened upon the Americas where you blended in pretty well apparently. Nevertheless, in the 19th century, when another wave of human migration was under way, in the space of a generation, you completely exterminated the passenger pigeon, flocks of which once darkened the sky over the prairies. It's impossible to calculate how many other species of animals, birds, insects and plants have been struck down by the hand of man. And yet, I am told that there are still some remote and inaccessible

(they'd have to be) places on earth where mankind continues to live in harmony with nature. Deep in the forests of South America are said to be people who live entirely off nature, eating what they find and getting medicinal cures from the wild plants that surround them, and leaving no trace as they move on. I guess the same goes for the few Bushmen who still inhabit parts of the Kalahari Desert down south somewhere.

**B**ut now, and getting back to the subject, and when it's almost too late, the fashionable talk is about biodiversity and the reconstitution of nature even while the destruction of the environment continues unabated on every continent. Do we need nature? Well, we in the animal kingdom certainly do but so do you, just as much—in fact much, much more. Wake up!

## Kenya Past and Present

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