

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF KENYA IN THE WAKE OF POST ELECTION VIOLENCE: LESSONS LEARNT

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Abstract

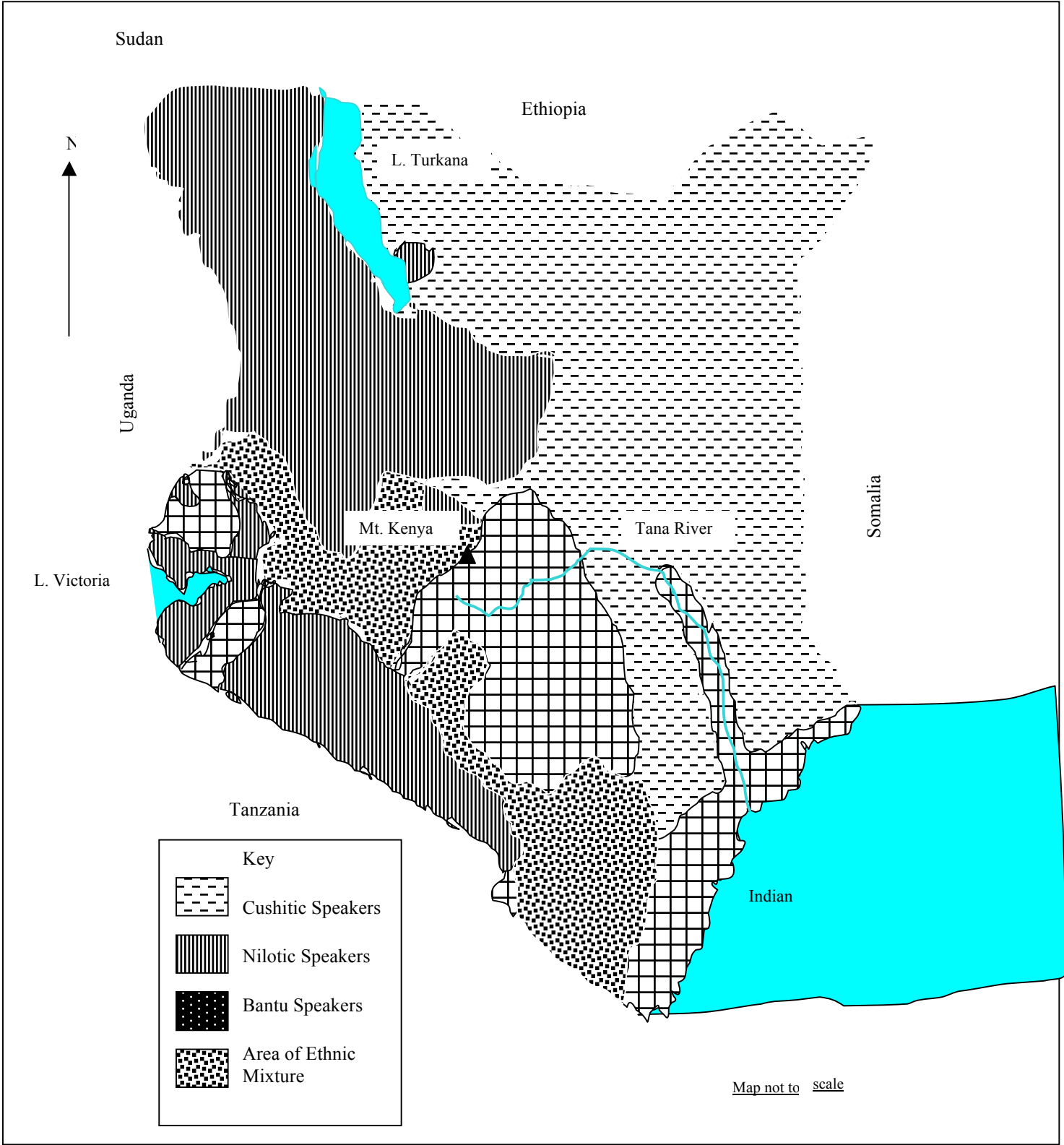
National Museums of Kenya (NMK) is mandated to carry out research, exhibit, and educate Kenyans, among other responsibilities. Kenya is a pluralistic society with 42 ethnic groups with diverse cultures and traditions. Every election year, politicians take advantage of the pluralistic nature of Kenyan society and campaign along tribal/ethnic lines. They further fuel ethnic animosities through issuance of irresponsible statements, which culminate in inter-ethnic clashes (popularly referred to as “tribal clashes”). The so-called tribal clashes end up causing losses of life, property, economic deterioration and lifetime animosities, to mention but a few of the consequences. The recently concluded, flawed presidential election of December 2007 has left untold direct and indirect losses to the people and the country. Some of the losses include the death of more than 1,000 people, the displacement of over 300,000 people, the destruction of property worth millions of dollars, and the economic cost of the crises being approximately \$500 million every week. The NMK, which is neutral and represents all ethnic groups, is best suited as a formal institution to take up roles in prevention, mitigation and recovery. The museum is privileged to host schools with children of mixed ethnic groups and institutions from all over the country. An inclusion of lectures on peaceful co-existence to the fresh minds of little school children, permanent exhibits with mixed ethnic representation, and temporary exhibits addressing daily concerns of the society could go a long way in preventing or reducing the occurrences of ethnic clashes. By joining the rest of the civil society in condemning acts of violence and getting involved in mediation efforts the museum can contribute in the reduction of loss of life and property, as well as in the mitigation process. Equally, educating people on disaster preparedness and management can go a long way in saving lives and valued documents, public and individual assets.

Introduction

The population of Kenya is comprised of three main linguistic groups with farming, herding, fishing, hunting and gathering economies. The linguistic groups include Cushitic, Nilotic and Bantu speakers as shown in fig. 1. The ecological diversity of Kenya, ranging from semi-desert through dry savanna plains to well watered uplands with extensive areas of montane forests and lakeshore environments (fig. 2), has produced a variety of ecological niches occupied by peoples who are ethnically and linguistically diverse with sharply contrasting socio-economic structures (Waller 1985). The grasslands and thorn bushes steppe of the Rift Valley is the domain of pastoralists, the dense forest of the adjacent escarpments and highlands is the home of hunter-gatherers, the highlands and forested areas are farming lands of the Bantu speakers, while the lake shores are occupied by fishermen who also practice agriculture. In each case the dominant form of activity is sometimes mistaken for the only one and groups are falsely characterized as purely pastoral or agricultural (Bersten 1976).

The Cushitic speakers, who are mostly pastoralists, include Galla, Somali, Boni, and Borana who occupy parts of the Northern Kenya and coastal regions. The Nilotic speakers, who practice pastoralism, farming and fishing, include Kalenjin, Luo and Maa speakers who occupy the Rift Valley and Lake Victoria region. The Bantu speakers on the other hand, who are predominantly farmers, occupy Central and Western parts of the country and include the Kikuyu, Meru, Embu, Kamba, Abagusii and the Abaluhya. The hunter-gatherers comprise a small population that lives in the forested areas of Kenya; these include the Okiek, the Yaaku and the coastal Dahalo.

The population of Kenya is estimated to be over 34 million, with the Kikuyu ethnic group comprising 22%, Luhyia 14%, Luo 13%, Kalenjin 13%, Kamba 11% and the remaining percentage shared among the other 38 ethnic groups. Due to the pluralistic nature of the Kenyan population, it is impossible to find a region that is occupied exclusively by one ethnic group. As such, since independence the ethnic groups have interacted and mixed through acquisition of land in other areas, career pursuits, intermarriages, and business opportunities, among other causes.



This has seen thousands of Kikuyus occupy lands in the Rift Valley, Coastal and Western Kenya, and Kalenjin, Luhya, and Luo occupy land in predominantly Kikuyu areas. During the so-called “tribal clashes” most victims are the Kikuyus living in the Rift Valley and the Coast areas. Every election year since 1992, when the country switched to multiparty politics, the politicians incite their electorates by promising them lands owned by minority groups within their constituencies and use vernacular radio transmissions to issue messages of hate causing enmity and animosity. The Kikuyu people are the most prosperous ethnic group in Kenya. They are thought to have benefited from historical injustices against other ethnic groups caused by Kikuyu regimes.

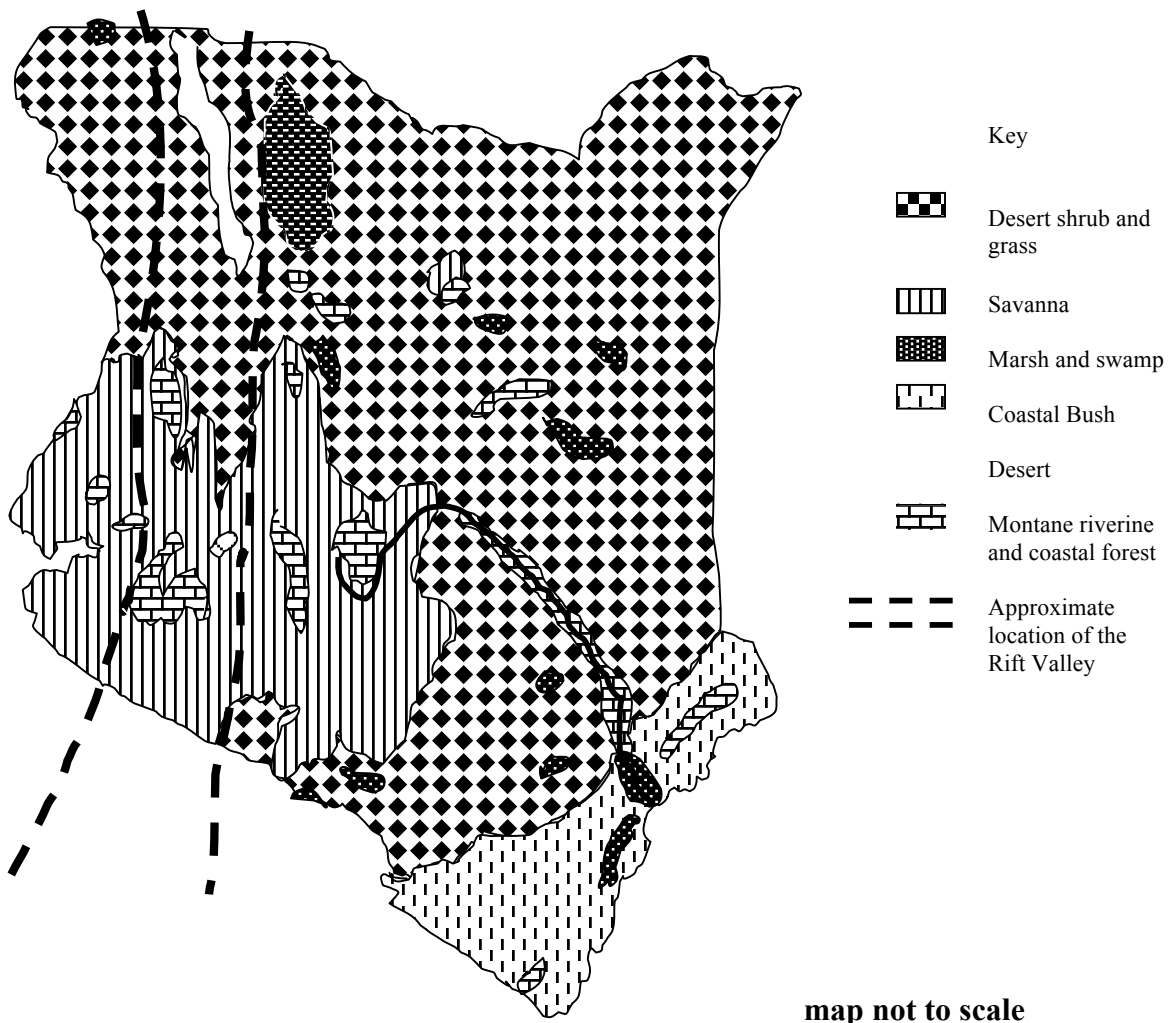


Fig. 2 Ecology of Kenya based on vegetation

The flawed 2007 presidential elections

Kenya, being a multiparty state, has registered more than 100 parties with different ideologies and promises to the people. Some of these parties, however, have united with the leading opposition party, Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), in order to form a stronger opposition front, while the pro-government parties joined Party of National Unity (PNU) to ensure its continuity. Following the diversity of Kenyan ethnicity, the ODM membership under the leadership of Raila Odinga (Luo) was mostly drawn from the Rift Valley, Western and Nyanza provinces, while the PNU membership under the leadership of President Mwai Kibaki (Kikuyu) was mostly drawn from the Central and Eastern provinces. The 2007 presidential election was the most closely contested since independence and was marked with a lot of irregularities. There were alleged rigging incidences by both sides of the divide, although President Mwai Kibaki was sworn in as the winner. The announcement of Mr. Mwai Kibaki as the winner sparked the election violence that followed in Nyanza and Rift Valley regions. The targeted groups were the supporters of the President, who were killed in large numbers, displaced and their property burnt. In Nairobi the civil unrest was caused by the supporters of ODM living in the slums. Weeks later, the arrival of trucks of displaced Kikuyu people to the Central province provoked the anger of the Kikuyu who started to take revenge. They killed and drove out the ODM supporters from the Central province.

Elections were the immediate cause of the so-called ethnic violence but, as events unfolded, it became clear that the election was just the last stroke on the camel's back. The causes were realized to lie in the Rift Valley land tenure and economic inequalities. The crises could no longer be solved through a political solution but through strengthening of institutions and amendment of the Kenyan constitution.

Historical Background

During the pre-colonial period, the above-described ecological niches were exploited by specific ethnic groups although there were no obvious boundaries. Among the farmers, land tenure was by individual ownership while some parts were considered communal lands. On the other hand, with the pastoralists and hunter-gatherers land tenure was

communal, such that anybody from the community was allowed to graze or hunt wherever they pleased. The subsistence economies complemented each other, so that farmers bartered with pastoralist and vice versa. Equally, the hunter-gatherers traded their forest products either with farmers for farm products or with pastoralists for animal products. This symbiosis was carried out peacefully with occasional raids, which were part of the traditional cultures and thus considered healthy.

With the coming of colonialists, the living style of Kenyans was disrupted in the most productive areas like the Rift Valley, Coastal and Central highlands regions. The colonialists systematically acquired all the land that was cultivatable in central Kenya, previously owned by Kikuyu, Meru, Embu and Kamba. They also acquired communal pastoral lands, which were owned by Maasai and Kalenjin communities. This era opened up Kenya's communal lands to individual ownership and saw many previous landowners reduced to squatters in their own lands. This arrangement angered most indigenous people and led to the formation of freedom fighters movements like the Mau Mau, the Nandi rebellions and other movements with membership from the affected communities. This led to Kenya's independence in 1963.

Upon the attainment of independence, the first president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta from the Kikuyu community, was sworn in. One of Kenyatta's tasks was to resettle the squatters and to give land to the freedom fighters and those that lost their lands in the hands of colonialists. The British government lent money to the newly formed government to enable it to buy land from the white settlers. This land was from the Rift Valley, the Coast and Central Kenya. The squatters in the Rift Valley had been drawn from all parts of the country, including Western and Central Kenya, leading to settlement of many Kikuyus and other non-Kalenjin people. Besides land that was reclaimed by the government, Kikuyu people formed co-operative societies and bought big chunks of land from the Rift Valley and the Coast, and later subdivided among themselves. Unfortunately, a new class of Kenyan bourgeoisie emerged through the purchase of big chunks of land leaving the poor majority with either very small pieces or none. This effectively brought about inequality in land resources, besides marking the beginning of settlement of non-Kalenjin and non-Maasai communities in the Rift Valley.

Political campaigns

Since Kenya's independence, the president and members of parliament are elected through secret ballot every five years. As expected, the elections are held after vigorous campaigns by the presidential and parliamentary aspirants. However, the campaigns in Kenya take an ethnic dimension, especially in the case of the presidency, where each ethnic group is eager to elect a president from their group. The supporters of each group go round the country soliciting for presidential votes and sometimes use language that causes animosity between ethnic groups. The campaigns provoke anger among the electorates especially as far as land issues are concerned. The Kalenjin in the Rift Valley view the Kikuyus as intruders and as responsible for their poor economic status since they were resettled in their land instead of Central Kenya. Likewise, the indigenous coastal dwellers, due to political incitements and historical injustices, harbor ill feelings for non-coastal dwellers settled along the Kenyan coast. Consequently, during campaigns, in some sections of coastal and Rift Valley areas ethnic violence breaks out as dominant ethnic groups uproot the minority groups. This has repeatedly taken place and left hundreds of people dead and thousands displaced from their homes. However, in most areas this stops immediately after campaigns and elections, only to recur after five years.

Markedly, the first election violence took place during the 1992 elections with the beginning of multiparty politics in Kenya, followed by 1997, 2002, and lastly, during the recently concluded elections of December 2007. Of all the ethnic clashes the 2007 clashes have been the worst and most widespread. They have left more than 1,200 people dead, more than 300,000 displaced and loss of property worth of millions of dollars. In addition, the violence has left the Kenyan economy on its knees with the country losing more than approximately 500 million dollars a week. The Kenyan violence has had advance spillover effect on its neighboring countries like Uganda, Rwanda and Southern Sudan, which are land locked and rely on the Kenyan ports for their imports.

Towards a lasting solution

Following the ethnic clashes, the government in place strives to find a lasting solution to the problem since the clashes keep recurring. Some of the efforts that have been made

include several commissions of inquiry into causes and perpetrators of the ethnic clashes: for example, the Kiliku report (1993) by a parliamentary commission on ethnic clashes, the Akiwumi commission (1997) formed by the former president Daniel Arap Moi, and the Land commission, popularly known as the Ndung'u report, commissioned (2004) by President Kibaki to look into the illegal /irregular allocation in public land. These commissions made recommendations, which the republic is still waiting to see implemented and the perpetrators brought to book.

In addition to the commissions, due to the magnitude of the 2007 post-election violence, both local and international mediators got involved in trying to find a lasting solution. Among the institutions and individuals involved were Koffi Annan (former Secretary-General of the UN), Ban Ki-moon (current Secretary-General of the UN), John Agyekum Kufuor, the president of Ghana and the Chairman of African Unity, foreign missions, retired presidents from the African continent, presidents from the neighbouring countries, civil societies like the Kenya law society, human rights bodies, religious leaders, business leaders, teacher commissions, and leaders of trade unions, among others. These groups came out to condemn the violence and to demand that the leaders from the government and the opposition find lasting solutions to the country's problems.

The perceived possible role of NMK – lessons learnt

The National Museums of Kenya is a formal institution charged with the mandate of carrying out research, exhibiting and educating the public, among other roles. The NMK is one of the best museums in Africa and, since its inception, it has faithfully and successfully executed its traditional roles in the society. It is one of the best research institutions in the country, carrying out research ranging from natural, social and biological sciences, hosting thousands of schoolchildren from different parts of the country every month, as well as being a foreign tourist attraction and one of the most popular spots for local tourism.

Unfortunately, despite the National Museums of Kenya's useful roles in the society, it lost part of its regional museum to arson in the wake of 2007 election violence. Some of the questions that remain to be answered are why the arsonists found it necessary to burn parts of the museum, whether they do not find the museums relevant,

or if the local populations do not identify with the museum. It is also unfortunate that the National Museums of Kenya as a civil society did not stand to be counted among all those that came out to condemn the violence and in the efforts to restore peace and hope among the affected. Would the museum be out stepping its mandate if it participated as a neutral institution to serve the communities that are the reason for its existence? Would it have been possible for the museum to contribute even if in a small way in prevention, mitigation and recovery process?

The exhibition themes of National Museums are tailored towards a foreign tourism clientele. This is in line with other colonial museums in Africa. National Museums of Kenya has kept the colonial tradition of exhibiting exclusively items of the dominant ethnic groups in the regional museums, leaving out the minority groups. For example, in Narok district (which was much hit by the ethnic violence), only Maasai cultural items are on museum display; likewise, Kabaranet museum in the Rift Valley (which experienced the most loss in terms of life and property) exhibits feature only the Kalenjin homesteads (unfortunately these were burnt during the ethnic clashes). This is the same with Kisumu museum where the Luo homesteads and their cultural items are displayed. Equally, in Meru museum only the Ameru homesteads and their cultural materials are on display. This kind of museum setting may contribute in giving the dominant groups a feeling of superiority and hence undermine the minority groups, thus promoting animosity in the society. What roles can the museums play in such a situation to reduce animosity, prevent ethnic clashes, mitigate or even help with recovery?

a) Permanent exhibitions

Asked what a museum is, most African children and some adults respond by saying that “it is a place where old things are kept.” Nothing could be closer than this in the case of the regional branches of NMK. While the National Museums of Kenya finds it necessary to make permanent exhibitions of the dominant populations for the foreign tourist clientele, it is evidently necessary that it also should include cultural items from all the ethnic groups living in the area in order to avoid biasness, creating hatred and animosity. This way all the members of communities living close to the museum are likely to identify with the museum and guard it. They might not want to go and see whatever is in

the permanent galleries, since these are items that they see every day but other carefully thought activities might bring them to the museum.

b) Temporary exhibitions

Temporary exhibitions can be used by the museums as powerful tools in educating the public on how to deal with their daily concerns. For example, because the museums are aware of ethnic diversity in the country, they are the most suited in educating the public on peaceful co-existence through temporary exhibitions. This way, the communities living together would have lasting memories of museum images, which would help in preventing future ethnic violence. Likewise, temporary exhibitions of cultural items from other ethnic groups can show diversity but with a common human ancestry, which might help to make the would-be human rights violators think twice. Other temporary exhibits, which are not directly related to ethnic diversity, would be exhibitions addressing common problems like diseases, economy, etc; for instance, in malaria prone areas exhibitions dealing with prevention and the fight against malaria would go a long way in saving lives.

c) Lectures

National Museums of Kenya has the space and the capacity to effectively educate the public on issues that are not in the school curriculum. Peaceful co-existence, for instance, is one of the lectures that NMK could deliver to schoolchildren and museum organized groups before getting into the galleries. The National Museums of Kenya framework is privileged to host thousands of young schoolchildren every month. These children have uncorrupted minds that are ready to learn. By offering peaceful co-existence lectures and showing videos of human, property and economic losses to these young minds, one is almost assured that they will grow up with these realities and the chance that some will hate violence. At the primary school level, when children visit the museums, most are not fully aware of their ethnic affiliations. They go to school, live, play, eat and drink with each other regardless of their ethnicity.

d) Community participation

To avoid museum losses during civil unrest, it is important for the museum to make the museum relevant to the people not only by making the exhibits more useful and friendly, but also by having the communities participate in deciding what they would want to see. The museum should move away from where the expertise resides in the hands of its staff alone and public views only what is on offer. Instead, the public should participate as shareholders in the determination of what should be put in the display. This gives them ownership not only to the museum but also to the exhibits, and reduces the chances of museum destruction.

e) Disaster management and mitigation

As a public servant, the museum should be in the forefront in preventing disasters, and mitigating and helping in the recovery when they occur. Unfortunately, the National Museums of Kenya does not have a disaster management plan or disaster management team in place; therefore, it would be difficult for it to get involved in any way during civil unrest. In a pluralistic society where ethnic clashes have occurred and recurred, NMK should engage itself in training the public on prevention. Apart from exhibitions and lectures on peaceful co-existence, lectures on how to safeguard important items and documents would have saved several people within the disaster-hit places a lot of agony. Most of the people living in these areas have had their documents such as land title deeds, medical records, and other important certificates burnt. With a bit of training these people would have had the choice of moving their valued documents or photocopies to safer places. Most people have lost claims over the family lands through arsonist fires and vandalism.

f) Mediation and recovery

National Museums of Kenya, being a neutral entity, should play the role of a mediator between different people that it serves, even if in a small way. While the politicians and international mediators convene to deliberate on power sharing and other national issues, museums should organize mediation meetings with leaders of the communities that they serve and negotiate for peace. It is necessary for the museum to show its stand during

such hard times in the country. The public entrusts the museum with its heritage and the museum should see it is in its interest to give back to the society through positive gestures during times of need.

Conclusion

It is necessary for the modern museums in Africa to move from colonial museum themes and move towards becoming more community participatory museums. The museums should be sensitive to the communities that they serve, and not only hope to draw income from exhibiting the community's fortunes but also come out as heroes during times of crises.

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