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Heritage and Memory in East Africa Today: A review of recent developments in cultural heritage research and memory studies

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Abstract: This article argues that the broadening over time of definitions of heritage has had strong implications for researchers working in East Africa today. Moving away from material preservationist issues of concern to governments and international heritage bodies, most scholars have recently focused their research on the entanglement of heritage with memory, politics, identity, and social healing processes. They also increasingly investigate the growing agency and centrality of civil society stakeholders, as well as the negotiation of power and authority between the different levels – local, national, international – involved in heritage making and heritage promotion. Focusing on the case of slavery and the slave trade, the rise of civil society engagement, and the contestations that continue to swirl around the commemoration of liberation heroes, the article depicts how heritage and memory have become a site of struggle – symbolically, ethically and emotionally charged – in today’s East Africa.

Keywords: heritage, museums, nation building, liberation struggle, slavery, East Africa

Introduction

Heritage is essentially about power and representations; it is a site of struggle. Belonging, ownership and the control of power underpin heritage and heritage making, that is, the space- and time-bound configurations in which heritage is delineated, appropriated, contested, and made central in economic, political and social struggles. In East Africa like elsewhere, scholars have turned away from former preservationist and antiquarian approaches. Such approaches had resulted in objectifying sites and monuments, folklorizing cultures, essentializing identities and memories, and producing wilderness fantasy. Instead, today’s researchers – notably those situated within the ‘critical heritage studies’ paradigm (Smith 2012) – scrutinize heritage making to unveil its varied processes and actors, its intricate challenges and tensions, and its intertwined objectives. Many among these researchers highlight that heritage making is not simply motivated by disinterested considerations about the inherent value of a given property, even less the product of apolitical collective understandings about any ‘outstanding universal value’, as some international actors and national states assert. As a consequence, they explore the variety of heritage policies, strategies and tactics developed by various stakeholders (local communities, the private sector,

government institutions, NGOs, international agencies, etc.) and at different scales in order to show that numerous agendas are pursued in heritage making: to gain control over resources; to accumulate wealth; to help recognize or rehabilitate cultures, identities and memories; and to obtain, maintain or contest power. In other words, this constructivist episteme foregrounds that heritage is what social actors make, and its aesthetic, emotional, moral and symbolic values are those which social actors assign to it.

This epistemological shift – which has been a general trend in humanities and social sciences more generally over the last three decades – is, in the case of heritage in East Africa, also a result of recent political, economic and social developments on the ground. After the 1960s independences, the designation of heritage properties was strongly connected to the national projects of the new African nation-states.¹ Like nineteenth century Europe, what ought to be assigned the status of heritage was firmly embedded in the state's policies and strategies to impose its own self-representation and enhance a shared sense of belonging to the national community. Monuments, museums, languages, landscapes, official history, revisited traditions were meant to serve centralised nation building – in spite of obvious contradictions and inconsistency between discourses and implementation (e.g. Gaugue 1997; Coombes 2011; Larsen 2011; K-Münene 2011; Coombes, Hughes and K-Münene 2014; Longair 2015). Besides its nationalist character, heritage making has also been driven by a growing international agenda for the protection, conservation and valorisation of natural sites and cultural properties for the presumed benefit of future generations. With the growth of mass tourism, national and international policy-makers have come to consider heritage an economic asset for income-generation and sustainable development. It is noticeable that, in most African countries, the identification of heritage sites by the state is made in view of further inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List.² It shows how much current state-led heritage making is perceived as a heritage industry, even though the international recognition of the contribution of Africa to humankind is also at stake.

This wave of heritage creation since the African independences brought about several changes over the last decade which are central to understanding why and how heritage is studied today (e.g. De Jong and Rowlands 2007). Firstly, it widened the definition of heritage. Formerly linked to anxious Western concerns about the loss of the past, heritage as a category has expanded; it now includes all natural or human tangible and intangible productions carrying special collective values. If some fear that heritage is becoming a catch-all term, and therefore

minimize its analytical relevance for academic research, others underline that exploring how the word is appropriated, used and played with by a wide range of stakeholders – a process which itself contributes to shifts in its definition – is part and parcel of any research on heritage. Secondly, it propelled heritage as a central site of present-day political, economic and social struggles, generating contest, resistance, opposition but also complicity and compliance. In East Africa, this takes place in a context of increased political activism by a plurality of civil society stakeholders, and the widening of democratic space – though this widening differs greatly from one country to another (Heathcott 2013; Coombes, Hughes and K-Mūnene 2014). This explains the growth in public interest concerning heritage, history, and memory. The involvement of a multiplicity of actors in heritage making requires researchers to not only provide insights into the intricate processes and tensions between different players, but also highlight how political, economic and social struggles around heritage are the product of the interplay between different scales of power, from the very local to the global.

The subject of heritage – notably cultural heritage which this article is focused on – has largely fallen outside *Azania*'s remit, largely because it was until recently primarily a journal of record, especially for archaeology. Nevertheless, 'heritage' in its many guises has been a long-running interest of the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA) with which *Azania* is associated, and is increasingly so, with Land, Heritage and Memory one of five major themes listed in the BIEA's 2014-19 Strategic Plan. The BIEA has also enjoyed a long-running partnership with the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), and other public or private museum services in the East African region; it also increasingly collaborates on this topic with European institutions based in East Africa, including the French Institute for Research in Africa (*Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique*, IFRA). It has supported a number of heritage-related conferences since the early 2000s, such as those in Zanzibar (2006), Zambia (2004 and 2012), and the Legacies of Struggle conference in Nairobi (March 2015). Papers from some of these conferences were later published in *Azania*, and also in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* (e.g. volume 32/4, edited by JoAnn McGregor and Lyn Schumaker (2006), which emerged from the 2004 'Heritage in Southern and Eastern Africa' conference in Livingstone, Zambia). The BIEA has funded and continues to fund a number of heritage-related research projects, whose findings have been published in *Azania* and elsewhere.

The trends and themes we have chosen to focus upon in this article inevitably reflect the areas of interest and expertise of the co-authors, who work respectively on Tanzania and Kenya. They also illustrate our arguments about the broadening over time of definitions of heritage,

and the implications of this for researchers; the reframing of heritage as an entanglement with memory, politics, healing processes and other factors, and the move away from regarding it principally as a material preservationist issue of concern to governments and international heritage bodies; the growing agency and centrality of civil society stakeholders, who sometimes work in partnership with state heritage managers, sometimes not, many of whom regard their engagement with heritage as part of a reclamation of subaltern history; and the contestations that continue to swirl around the commemoration of liberation heroes, who have come to define or even embody both the birth and future of the nation. Some readers may take issue with our relative lack of focus on heritage institutions and the institutionalization of heritage, or an emphasis on African heritage over non-autochthonous heritage, but we suggest that other important research themes have been less well covered in the literature on heritage in East Africa and deserve to be highlighted.

Slavery as ‘heritage’ in East Africa

The case of the memorialisation of slavery – be it intra-African slavery, domestic and plantation slavery, or the long-distance slave trade – illustrates the point we make here that heritage is about the entanglement of memory, history, politics and economics; and that it both results from and brings about struggles over power and representations which have strong symbolic, ethical and emotional resonance. In East Africa, the heritage making of slavery was mainly prompted by international agencies’ agenda in the 2000s and appropriated by national states rather than the result of civil society-driven claims or international tourism dynamics. It was linked to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) ‘Slave Route Project’ launched in 1994 (UNESCO 2006; Wynne-Jones 2011). This is in sharp contrast with West Africa where the heritage making of sites of slavery took place at the national level as early as the late 1970s due to the booming industry of ‘tourism of memory’ or ‘roots tourism’ that had catered to the needs for pilgrimage by African Americans (Ebron 1999). In East Africa, Tanzania exemplifies how the heritage making of slavery mostly results from state-led programmes associated with economic growth and poverty reduction. As shown by Stephanie Wynne-Jones (2011), UNESCO’s proposal to enlist the 1200 km central caravan route stretching from the town of Ujiji on Lake Tanganyika to the East African coast as a World Heritage Site took place within an emerging heritage industry in the country. Similarly, Steven Fabian (2013) reminds us that Tanzania’s recent national economic strategy, which relies upon the creation of magnets for international visitors, explains government efforts to make the coastal town of Bagamoyo a World Heritage

Site.

The poor involvement of local populations in this state-led initiative is an effect of what the historical experience of slavery means in present-day East Africa. Unlike other historical events in the region, slavery had indeed long been an object of silence and shame on the continent (Klein 1989). This silence resulted from a chosen amnesia which was two-faceted: individual and collective trauma brought about ruptures in the transmission of family memories of slavery, which led to partial forgetting; and early strategies of integration within the host society were put in place by ex-slaves to erase the stigma attached to slave descent (e.g. Fair 2001). As explained by Patricia Romero Curtin in the case of the Lamu archipelago in Kenya, ‘a rigid consciousness of social class’ gave to slaves ‘the lowest status, or “nothingness”, as social beings’ (Romero-Curtin 1983: 875). Memories mainly persisted as a public secret hardly articulated except for fragments of recollections resurfacing in daily conversations or gossip, or survived in non-discursive practices, like in rituals and religious cults (Strobel 1979; Larsen 1998). However, recent archaeological works, notably on fugitive slave or *watoro* in coastal Kenya (Wilson Marshall 2013) and slave descendants on plantation sites in Tanzania (Croucher 2014) have recovered material evidence that gives insight into the life of slaves as well as slave owners, and past social interactions.

The history and legacy of slavery has also haunted official history in ambiguous ways. State-orchestrated amnesia in most African postcolonial contexts was the rule as the public expression of histories and memories could have created internal divisions and hampered nation building. Yet, this politics of oblivion in East African postcolonial governments concerned domestic slavery as an internal form of social and economic organisation because of its high divisive impact within fledgling nation states. The slave trade, however, generally referred to in the official history of the East African region as the ‘Islamic’ or ‘Arab’ slave trade, entrenched a binary division between mainland Africans on the one hand, and Swahili and people originating from the Arab Peninsula, mainly today’s south Yemen and Oman, on the other, targeted – and demonized – as the ‘ex-slave masters’. Race and origins rather than culture and rights were made central elements for nation building, therefore contributing to harnessing citizenship, autochthony and race to postcolonial East African national imaginaries (Glassman 2010, 2011; Kiriama 2013).

In this complex situation where the past history of slavery still inhabits hierarchies of power

and prestige as well as identity categories and conceptions of citizenship, the redefinition of slavery as ‘heritage’ clearly re-opened old wounds, but it also provided some disfranchised groups with new avenues to claim rights of property and control, as well as status and dignity. From the point of view of UNESCO, the ‘Slave Route Project’ was indeed grounded on the argument that the coming out of memory narratives of slavery and the historical and archaeological documentation of slavery could put an end to the situation of silence and stigma attached to slavery. ‘Breaking the silence’ – to refer to UNESCO’s catchphrase (2006) – was aimed at easing present-day social divisions rooted in the legacy of the slavery past. In Kenya, being ‘ex-slaves’ is an identity recently appropriated in Frere Town, a historical settlement of Christianized freed slaves on the Indian Ocean coast near Mombasa (Kiriamia and Ballarin 2013; Wilson Marshall 2013). The Frere community, who had long refused to acknowledge any slave ancestry, now mobilize around three sites of memory – their church, a bell that was used to summon the freed slave to school and chapel, and the cemetery – which, to them, represent their specific culture, history and legacy, and could attract international tourism; they even claim a specific status as ‘the 43rd tribe of Kenya’, which would include them as true autochthons alongside other Kenyan citizens (Kiriamia and Ballarin 2013). This example shows that the rekindled memories of slavery by grassroots movements are intertwined with an internationally-led impulse and associated with both symbolic significance and expected financial benefits.

Yet, the recent visibility of a silenced past has produced ambiguous, even disturbing phenomena which question the notion of ‘memory’ and require scholars to reconsider the status of historical truth in locally produced narratives of slavery. The slave market in Zanzibar is undoubtedly the most revealing case. This site has worked as a ‘monument to Britain’s moral crusade against slavery’ (Glassman 2010: 178) since the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa built an Anglican Cathedral Church on the former slave marketplace the year it was closed, in 1873. Until today, made-up stories have circulated about two low-ceilinged rooms, called the ‘slave chambers’. They glorify abolitionism and, at the same time, exacerbate the reification and essentialisation of a bounded racial identity of ‘Arab’ that would subsume all slave traders and owners. Scholarly historiography contradicts these historical distortions. Yet, this did not inform the slavery exhibition board at the entrance of the slave market; neither is it translated into explanations given by tour guides (Wynne-Jones and Walsh 2010). Zanzibar, like in the high-profile cases of Benin (Ciarcia 2008), Ghana (Schramm 2007; Holsey 2008) or Gorée in West Africa (Bocum and Toulhier 2013) where

historical objectivity has been sacrificed to the needs of tourism and a sacralised duty of memory, is becoming a place of ‘sensationalist fictions’ and the slave market nothing but a ‘myth’ (Glassman 2010: 179). The same is true of Bagamoyo, which was never a major exit port for slaves. As Steven Fabian asks, ‘Is it justifiable to create a public memorial to the Indian Ocean slave trade on the scale of a UNESCO World Heritage Site in a town with only a minor connection to it?’ (2013: 106). The case of the Shimoni caves in coastal Kenya raises similar questions of constructed memories and authenticity (Wynne-Jones and Walsh 2010; Kiriamu 2013). Studying locally-produced histories by home-grown historians and ideologues as well as state discourses and practices about the past brings to light historical distortions in the face of living memories and scholarly historiography; but more than that, it helps us understand the formation of a palimpsest of narratives which, selectively used at various historical moments for certain political and symbolic purposes, is all the more so entrenched in ordinary people’s images of slavery today as the lived experience of slavery is becoming history.

The rise of civil society engagement with heritage

One of the most significant developments since the mid-1990s, particularly in Kenya, has been the upsurge of citizens’ engagement with local heritage and history, and with it a concomitant interest by scholars in studying this subject (e.g. Deisser and Eastop 2008; Harrison and Hughes 2010; Carrier 2011; Coombes 2011; Hughes 2011; Coombes, Hughes and Munene 2014; Davies, Dupeyron and Moore 2014; Davies, Kiprutto and Moore 2014; Josse-Durand 2014; Schmidt 2014; Lane 2015; Nyamweru and Carrier, forthcoming). This engagement goes beyond and does not necessarily involve heritage management *per se*, but is perceived in some quarters as presenting a direct challenge to professional state heritage management. State managers are nervous about the perceived threats posed by non-professionals to their centralised authority, and there are legitimate concerns, for instance, about the conservation and security of tangible heritage held by amateur collectors and curators. Deisser and Eastop describe a successful partnership project in Ethiopia, between heritage professionals and the religious community at Ankober, to preserve religious artefacts. They argue that a partnership approach to preservation ‘has the potential to integrate and combine local African preservation practices with Western practices of conservation’ (2008: 1029). However, elsewhere in the region local people have tended to take the opposite view; they tell researchers that heritage is not safe in the hands of the state, and should be returned

to the grassroots – or the ‘subalterns’ whose voices have been ignored, even muffled, for too long. Kenya’s new constitution (2010) gives communities licence to lay claim to their cultural heritage, and even pledges to introduce legislation to ‘ensure that communities receive compensation or royalties for the use of their cultures and cultural heritage’, but national heritage laws (under revision at the time of writing) appear to contradict some of this, and the constitution does not define the meaning of the word ‘culture’. The draft Kenya Heritage Authority Bill 2015 states that all antiquities, including ‘objects of ... cultural interest’, are government property (Part VIII, 62 (1): 36) and subject to compulsory acquisition. It will be interesting to see what impact this legislation has on the control of objects in private hands, or on so-called community lands. The arguments that continue to rage around ‘Turkana Boy’, for instance (who owns the bones, the local community, the NMK or the world?), provide one high-profile example of tensions around the ownership of heritage. Turkana Boy is the popular name for a fossilised skeleton found at Lake Turkana in 1984, believed to be 1.6 million years old. Ownership is contested between the Kenya Government and the Turkana community. But there are many other fascinating, lesser-known developments in the civil society-driven heritage sector, some of which we shall describe here.

This phenomenon coincided (at least in Kenya) with the widening of democratic space, rise of identity politics, proliferation of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) linked to international NGOs and globalised indigenous rights’ activism, and the growing empowerment of civil society following the end in 2002 of Daniel arap Moi’s repressive rule. It may also be regarded region-wide as a delayed response to the imposition of Eurocentric knowledge and taxonomies on African colonial subjects and cultures – which often (but not always) involved their denigration and suppression – and their continuation in early postcolonial regimes. Ethiopia exemplifies the growing influence of ‘heritage and development brokers’ who do not act simply as middlemen between national recipients and international benefactors in heritage making and promotion, but embody – and serve – a vision of local development (Josse-Durand 2015). In countries where power remains centralised and nation building is still viewed as the product of top-down unification through standardisation rather the recognition of diversity, like in Tanzania, or where the government is highly autocratic, notably Rwanda, the incidence of civil society-led heritage initiatives is markedly less important – not to mention countries where conflict continues, like South Sudan.

Private museums

This new engagement – where it exists – manifests in various ways. One is the proliferation of small private museums, often created in people’s own homes and compounds, and usually self-funded. [Figure 3] Their self-styled curators tend to explain their motivation as a desire to preserve items of material culture associated with their own ethnic community, and a wish to educate children and youth who have become estranged from their culture and history as a result of modern educational practices, such as the widespread use of boarding schools, and urbanisation. Groups of schoolchildren are welcomed to these museums, as they also are to state museums (where they often constitute the largest visitor group). Unlike state museums, however, visitors are actively encouraged to touch and handle the objects; there are no glass cases here. The curators often describe such museums and collections as ‘living’, as opposed to the ‘dead’ displays – as they see it – in state museums, asserting for instance that ‘the cultural artefacts should be shown in use for the purpose and in the context for which they were originally made and not just sitting on a shelf somewhere’ (Coombes 2014: 76).

In Kenya, since devolution to new county governments in 2013, and an intensified focus on cultural heritage-related tourism – beyond wildlife and beach tourism – as a revenue earner at both national and county level, it remains to be seen whether more private museums will switch their focus from their mission to transmit cultural knowledge to a more brazen commercialisation of Culture Inc. via tourism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). This would be understandable, especially given the region-wide marginalization of non-professionals engaged in heritage tourism. In Fort Jesus, Mombasa, travel guides are frustrated and even offended that state heritage managers do not recognise ‘their local knowledge and expertise’ (Sarmiento 2011: 51) in spite of a context of decreasing financial capacity and human resources in the NMK (Oluoch 2015).

One danger, which also applies to the community museums discussed below, is that these spaces are in fact cultural resource centres dedicated to promoting the heritage of particular ethnic groups as discrete, primordial and essentialist, and requiring ‘preservation’. Scholars argue that Kenyan devolution is exacerbating this trend towards the reification and essentialisation of bounded sub-national cultural identities, and with it, the idea that heritage is bounded, too. Though the state has – in common with others in the region – made concerted efforts to promote a national Kenyan identity, not least by trying to create a national dress (the

commissioned design was derided by citizens and never adopted), the reality on the ground is a relentless promotion of sub-national identities and cultures centred on the 42 so-called tribes (which do not include Kenyan-Asians or Kenyans of European descent, among others).

Rwanda offers a stark counterpoint, since President Paul Kagame's government banned all reference to ethnicity in its effort to unite the nation following the 1994 genocide. A burgeoning scholarship discusses the effects of this state-orchestrated amnesia in a 'New Rwanda' that 'revolves around creating an all-inclusive "Rwandanness" as a "fictive ethnicity"' (Brandstetter 2010: 13). The state-run Ethnographic Museum (there are no private museums in Rwanda) chooses to focus almost entirely on the ethnographic present; the past is idealised in a space that makes no mention of conflict, though a large number of state-run genocide museums and memorials make genocide visible, if not its ethnic components.

Community museums

Another key example of civil society-led initiatives is the Kenyan community peace museums movement, founded by former NMK ethnographer Dr Sultan Somjee in the mid-1990s. Of the original 23, some 16 remain; many are run voluntarily by people originally trained by Somjee as his research assistants. **[Figure 4]** Peace museums also exist in other parts of the region; for example, there are several in northern Uganda, created as sites of reconciliation and healing for internally displaced people (IDPs) and others affected by the violence of the Lord's Resistance Army. One example is the Human Rights Focus Peace Museum at Gulu, mentioned in *Community Museums in Uganda* (2012: 23). This use of the term 'museum' for spaces which often include peace gardens entails a marked shift: a museum 'encompasses all memorial activities/memory work that bring the past into the present for the transmission of culturally and symbolically significant purposes for the people' (pers. comm. Abiti 22/11/2012). But the Kenyan peace museums are distinctive in several respects, and were born of unique circumstances. These included a response to politically-instigated inter-ethnic conflict in the Rift Valley before the 1992 multi-party elections (Coombes, Hughes and K-Münene 2014: 8). Many of them have adjacent peace tree gardens and run peace education programmes in local schools. Other outreach work has made important contributions to post-conflict reconciliation, notably the 'beaded peace tree' project that sought to reconcile communities torn apart by the post-election violence of 2008 (Hughes and K-Münene 2013; Coombes 2014: 167-8).

Community museums without a specific peace focus are a separate but related phenomenon. The founders of Ugandan community museums echo their Kenyan counterparts in saying, for example: ‘I decided to build this Museum for our children and grandchildren, to teach the future generation about the past’ (Festo Karwemera of Edirisa Museum, Kabale, quoted in *Community Museums in Uganda* 2012: 6). Knowledge exchange with the Kenyan peace museums has taken place through educational visits that have also included representatives from Uganda National Museum (see Anon. 2014).

Cultural villages

Cultural villages, often created and run by individual entrepreneurs, have also proliferated across East Africa in recent years, especially around the game parks of Kenya and Tanzania (Lane 2015). They tend to be targeted at international tourists, as part of the increasingly fashionable ‘tribal experience’ safaris that promise the thrill of ‘authentic’ encounters with ‘the primitive’, and involve performance of dance and song alongside the hard sell of curios. Some villages have gone beyond receiving day visitors to offering accommodation; Kenya’s Tourism Board website tempts tourists with the words: ‘You could choose to stay in the villages and experience untainted traditional ways of life’, counterpointing the notion of a pristine past with a ‘tainted’ present.

Kenya’s cultural villages appear to be modelled on the state-run heritage site Bomas of Kenya on the outskirts of Nairobi, but the cultural villages of South Africa, which have sprung up since the 1980s, have also clearly provided inspiration in both Kenya and Tanzania (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 11, 14). As in South Africa, there is a marked tension in these spaces between the promotion of ethnic mono-cultures and that of cultural diversity enshrined in an ostensibly united, ‘rainbow’ nation. Bruner describes Bomas as a ‘government museum of the performing arts’, and he terms the whole phenomenon ‘ethnic theme parks’; the Comaroffs have similarly referred to ‘culture parks’ (2009: 11). Such villages often involve the enactment of colonial nostalgia, and simulation of a ‘traditional’ past, reproducing ‘stereotypic images, discredited histories, and romantic fantasies’ (Bruner 2005: 76, 77). It is not only foreign tourists who appear to buy into this fantasy, but the growing number of domestic tourists, too. Domestic tourism promotion in the Kenyan press has markedly changed, from images of wildlife and leaping Maasai warriors to (for example) an April 2015 image of a young, and apparently affluent, black Kenyan couple basking in the glow of a

safari campfire – the Karen Blixen-style sundowner refashioned for a new market. The official website, however, remains largely centred on images of wildlife and warriors, interspersed with adventure sports and other relatively new additions.

Heroes and liberation struggle heritage

The public commemoration of national heroes and heroines, particularly those associated with anti-colonial liberation struggle, has become *de rigueur* across the continent. It is difficult, however, to determine for East Africa how much of the push to identify, commemorate and memorialise heroes is coming from ordinary citizens, rather than the state and various advocacy groups. In this respect, the situation is very different from one country to another (Charton and Fouéré 2013).

In the case of Tanzania, the state is the main agent in the memorialisation of political heroes and, as committed as ever to the same nation-building strategy since independence, it favours centrality rather than plurality. The regime's efforts at producing and reproducing Julius Nyerere as the 'father of the nation' are made at the expense of other central figures in the fight for national independence (Fouéré 2014; Said 2014). The southern and eastern African programme 'Roads to Independence in Africa: the African Liberation Heritage', jointly run by the African Union and UNESCO and hosted by Tanzania, has been embraced by Tanzania to memorialise liberation movements and enhance the nation's symbolic status within the grand Eastern Africa region.³ Yet it focuses on political parties and well-known anti-colonialist figures rather than recovering forgotten heroes or rehabilitating controversial personalities; it also promotes a glorious and patriotic conception of liberation struggles rather than, for instance, digging into – and hoping to heal – painful or divisive memories and legacies of conflict.

In Kenya, the state has also dominated the monumental landscape of commemoration of political heroes, but not without a struggle. Some monuments have become, as Coombes argues for the statue of Mau Mau leader Dedan Kimathi in Nairobi city centre, 'susceptible to multiple symbolic stagings by competing constituencies' (Coombes 2011: 219; also see Larsen 2011, 2012). The Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) has played a leading role in pushing for the commemoration of heroes, linking up with Mau Mau war veterans' groups to do so. The KHRC also promoted the idea that earlier anti-colonial resisters had

equally helped to bring about independence, and ought to be hailed as liberation heroes alongside Mau Mau (Hughes 2011). While ahistorical, this was understandable at the time as part of efforts to unite different ethnic groups in the wake of the 2008 post-election violence. It involved trying to broaden the category of ‘liberator’ beyond Mau Mau, whose fighters were primarily Gikuyu, to include rebel leaders from other communities. Koitalel arap Samoei, a Nandi, is increasingly made a figure of national stature, for instance (Josse-Durand 2014); and the memorialisation of female resistance leader Mekatilili wa Menza – often popularly, if inaccurately, described as Kenya’s first freedom fighter – allows the Giriama community to assert a claim to their contribution to liberation from colonial rule, even though her legacy has to some extent been hijacked by local and national politicians, state heritage managers and war veterans’ groups (Nyamweru 2015; Nyamweru and Carrier, forthcoming).

Yet, the ‘heroes project’ is undeniably also promoted by the government and used as a tool for redefining imaginaries of the nation. The establishment of the Mashujaa or Heroes Day, which has replaced the mono-hero Kenyatta Day since 20 October 2010, illustrates the state impulse towards the pluralisation of anti-colonial heroism (Charton 2013). Collaboration between the state, war veterans, human rights bodies and scholars is the rule in this heritage making of new heroes, as shown for instance in the collection of veterans’ oral histories and archaeological excavation of Mau Mau war sites by scholars at Karatina University in collaboration with the NMK (Ndiema and Mwaruvie 2015).

Forgetting (or what Joost Fontein has called ‘a very noisy silence’), however, remains as much the order of the day for the state as loud remembering; this is especially the case with painful memories of civil conflict.⁴ A good example is the tentative memorialisation of ongoing war in South Sudan, which is largely not an elite, state-led or veterans-led enterprise. Memorials such as the one built by local people at Lol Nyiel, Gogrial region, in the shape of a metre-high pile of bodies, commemorate the suffering and death of ordinary people, in this case the mass execution by police of civilians during Sudan’s first civil war in 1964 (Cormack 2015). This conflict has not left any bodies (most are ‘lost’, and there has been no official body count). This absence of human remains is in stark contrast to the public exhibition of skulls and skeletons in post-genocide Rwanda’s state-controlled sites of memory – a politics of dead bodies which Rwandans are increasingly ill at ease with, perhaps because the ‘public display’ of dead bodies during the genocide left unhealed traces (Eltringham 2015). Ethiopia adopted a similar approach of public display of bones and bodies in the Red Terror Martyrs

Memorial Museum opened in 2010 to commemorate the victims of the Derg terror (1974-1987). In these still emotionally-charged contexts, the expected growth of ‘dark tourism’ in the region may reveal unsettling moral considerations, if the expected financial gains of such sites exceed their symbolic significance for humankind.

Conclusion: Heritage as healing?

Research across the region and beyond has wrestled with the idea that heritage and heritage making may be central to collective healing processes. What the historical experience of slavery, liberation struggles or postcolonial conflicts have in common, in spite of their irreducible individual patterns and contexts, is that they all entailed violence and suffering that left traces on the societies concerned, but also generated narratives (notably subaltern ones) as well as practices of divisions and differences. Focusing on a different kind of contemporary violence, and taking a human-rights approach, Schmidt (2015) has discussed the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on the Haya community of Tanzania, and worked with that community to recover oral traditions and ‘traditional’ religious practices from which people derive great spiritual and emotional succour.

Both state and citizens have attempted to employ cultural heritage as a tool for post-conflict and other types of social healing, with varying degrees of success. As John Giblin notes, ‘Heritage is invoked for post-conflict development by international organisations, governments, and sub-national groups to provide emotional and cultural, including economic, healing for individuals and societies’ (Giblin 2014: 500). Museums, monuments, statues, human remains, archival traces or commemorations are heritage devices aimed at appeasing tense memories, balancing remembering and forgetting, and enhancing the multiplicity of narratives about similar historical experiences in the face of univocal – and often forced – remembrance. However, Giblin terms the ‘does heritage heal or hurt?’ question a ‘distraction’ for scholars, and suggests heritage is better understood as ‘part of a healing complex’ (op. cit.: 500, 501). He urges scholars to look beyond this question to reconsider heritage as a cultural production process, and to theorise it more generally as a form of cultural renewal.

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¹ The colonial model of top-down definition and management of heritage informed post-independence heritage policies in East Africa.

² With 78 sites inscribed on the UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites, Sub-Saharan Africa represents only 9 per cent of the total number of international heritage sites worldwide.

³ This programme acknowledges the importance of liberation movements to the process of decolonization in Africa; it includes the memorialisation of specific sites (like liberation camps, or the headquarters of exiled political parties), and the creation of museums, libraries and archives. See <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001540/154025eo.pdf>

⁴ Fontein made this remark, with reference to Mau Mau and Gukurahundi, Zimbabwe, at the BIEA workshop Legacies of Struggle, Nairobi, March 2015.