



Shaping the Heritage Landscape: Perspectives from East and southern Africa
5-6 May 2010
The British Institute in Eastern Africa, Nairobi

This workshop will focus on issues around heritage, memory, identity, culture and peace making in these two regions, drawing upon new research.

Funded by the British Academy, it will be co-hosted by Dr Lotte Hughes (The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK), Prof Karega-Munene (United States International University, Nairobi, Kenya) and Prof Annie Coombes (Birkbeck College, University of London, UK).

A keynote address will be given by Prof Terence Ranger (University of Oxford) on the evening of Wednesday 5 May, followed by a drinks reception. An all-day workshop will take place on Thursday 6 May, and include a second Kenyan keynote speaker, Kiprop Lagat of the National Museums of Kenya.

Confirmed speakers are (in alphabetical order):

Prof Heike Becker (University of Western Cape, South Africa) – ‘Memory and its malcontents: The Namibian national Heroes’ Acre’

Dr Neil Carrier (University of Oxford) – ‘Commemorating Mekatilili: From forgotten Giriama resistance leader to national heroine’

Timothy Gachanga (coordinator, Community Peace Museums Heritage Foundation, Kenya) – ‘The Pacifist Presence in Kenya’

Prof Frederick Kang’ethe Iraki – ‘Language, Memory, Heritage and Youth: The Sheng idiom’

Kiprop Lagat (National Museums of Kenya) – ‘The August Seventh Memorial Park: Remembering the 1998 Nairobi terror attack’

Dr Sada Mire (Director of Antiquities, Somaliland) – ‘The Historical Significance of Sacred Landscapes of the Horn of Africa and the Impact of the Current Political Situation in the Region’

Prof Terence Ranger (University of Oxford) – ‘Contested Heritage in Zimbabwe’

Dr Belle Asante Tarsitani (Kyoto University, Japan) ‘Cultivating Heritage under Ethnic Federalism: The regional museum boom in Ethiopia’.

Dr Hughes, Prof Munene and Prof Coombes will also give a short presentation on the AHRC-funded collaborative research project they are involved in, ‘Managing Heritage, Building Peace: Museums, memorialisation and the uses of memory in Kenya’.

Pre-registration for the workshop is essential, and numbers will be limited to 60 for reasons of hall capacity. To book a place please email Heather Scott at h.scott@open.ac.uk. There will be a small fee of 100Ksh, payable on the 6th.

(see overpage for abstracts received so far)

ABSTRACTS

'Memory and its Malcontents: The Namibian National Heroes Acre'

Prof Heike Becker

This paper explores a significant site of the Namibian landscape of memory: the country's national Heroes' Acre, an official national heritage site. Located just south of the capital Windhoek, Heroes' Acre was installed in 2002 to "honour the fallen heroes and heroines".

Monuments and memorials are designed to encode selected memories and historical narratives. As Paul Connerton (1989) has shown, encoding is central to the understanding of collective memory; most monuments and memorials encode specific narratives through visual and/or iconic signifiers.

Analysing national monuments and memorials as objectified forms of social memory and as spaces of ritual commemoration allows for a window into how ruling elites constitute a nation's collective memory and founding myth. The erection of a monument to commemorate the dead of past violence – fallen heroes and victims alike – may prove to be a particularly potent strategic move to legitimatise the emergence of a new socio-political order. Remembering and commemorating the dead thus pose special challenges in postcolonial contexts, where an ostensibly "new" nation-state imagines itself to be founded on a past violent conflict. The paper argues that the Namibian national Heroes' Acre is a site of social remembrance, which has its origins in, and since its inauguration has re-constituted a dominant historical narrative that emphasises a glorious past of a victorious armed struggle for national liberation. The master narrative is reflected in the site's visual and iconic signification.

The paper will draw comparisons with Zimbabwe, South Africa's "Freedom Park" site near Pretoria and Rwanda's genocide memorials. These latter work through distinctly different sets of signifiers, which locate them firmly in a postmodernist emblematic aesthetic.

The analysis draws on contestations surrounding the site and the narrative, which is encoded in the monument. It extends to a reflection of how the Heroes' Acre monument and the national ritual ceremonies for which it provides a physical and social space facilitate particular forms of remembering the dead as processes of postcolonial identification.

'Commemorating Mekatilili: From forgotten Giriama resistance leader to national heroine'

Dr Neil Carrier

This paper focuses on the recent commemorations of Mekatilili, a Giriama woman who played a key part in the Giriama rising against the British early last century. After introducing what is known of Mekatilili from the archival record and the historiography, the paper then examines why, after the Mekatilili legend had faded away for much of the 20th Century, there has been an efflorescence in her commemoration in the form of parades honouring her, a school bearing her name, and the building of a cultural centre in her home area near Malindi. This efflorescence is connected with the recent push to nationalise Kenyan heroes, particularly those who resisted the British, and owes much to the work of the Malindi District Cultural Association which emphasises both the peculiarly Giriama qualities of Mekatilili, as well as the qualities she shares with other Kenyan heroes. The paper ends by assessing the appeal that the legend of Mekatilili has for many diverse audiences.

'The Pacifist Presence in Kenya'

Timothy Gachanga

Every scholar who has studied the Akorino faith group has concluded that they were a persecuted lot. They have highlighted the justification of the crackdown of the Akorino by British authorities in colonial Kenya. The persecution took the form of arrests and imprisonments, repatriation to the tribal reserves and murders. The purpose of this paper is to describe Akorino and their historical development, highlight the persecution from their perspective and then describe how Akorino continue to strengthen their community in response to injustice, forced imposition of values and violence. The paper concludes by arguing that the preservation of Akorino heritage of peace and non-violence is important not only for them but also for the entire Kenyan population. If this heritage of peace and non-violence is well articulated, preserved and shared it may generate significant regional and perhaps global peace ramifications.

'Language, Memory, Heritage and Youth: The Sheng idiom'

Prof Frederick Kang'ethe Iraki

In matters of community memory and heritage, the language issue is critical since language is a key conveyor and repository of culture. Although Kenya is multi-lingual, Kenya's colonial history tends to favour the adoption of English as the preferred language. Recently, the Kenya National Examination Council proposed that Kiswahili – the putative national language – becomes an optional subject in Kenyan schools, whilst maintaining English, the country's official language, as a compulsory subject.

Granted about 60% of the Kenyan population is estimated to be made up of the youth – aged 30 years and below – and that young persons are migrating in huge numbers to urban centers due to a paucity of opportunities in the rural areas, it is reasonable to assume in a few decades most of the youths will be urban dwellers. But what language will they be speaking?

Sheng has been the language of the urban youth, especially from the economically-challenged neighbourhoods, since the 1960s. Despite the frequent mutations of the medium, relative stability and growth has been noted in the language. Further, the language has gained currency to include older generations, especially those who used it in the 1960s. The popularity and ubiquity of Sheng among the youth makes it an ideal language through which we can begin to dialogue with them. As most of the youth tunes into Ghetto FM and signs up for the Sheng website, the language becomes not just a means of communication but also a powerful identity tool. The youth identify themselves as a distinct group from those other Kenyans who speak vernacular languages, Kiswahili or English.

This paper demonstrates how the Sheng language can be a powerful instrument in the encryption of the collective memory of Kenyans. It argues that keeping out Sheng might also mean shutting out most of the youths in the country.

'The August Seventh Memorial Park: Remembering the 1998 Nairobi terror attack'

Kiprop Lagat

The bombing of the United States embassy in Nairobi on the 7th of August 1998 remains one of the worst terror attacks to be perpetrated against American interests in Kenyan territory. In its aftermath more than two hundred people died, the majority of them Kenyan, and property of unknown value was destroyed.

Those who survived were affected in significant ways and are still recuperating from the physical and psychological effects visited upon them. A memorial park and museum has since been developed at the location where the former US embassy stood to serve as a memorial garden and place of solace and reflection while reminding its visitors of the heinous act of terrorism and to promote healing, tolerance and understanding among the people of the world. This paper describes the history and development of the park, the different levels of its functioning, the interpretation of its symbolism and the narratives generated around it, and finally examines its role as a site of memory in Kenya.

‘The Historical Significance of Sacred Landscapes of the Horn of Africa and the Impact of the Current Political Situation in the Region’

Dr Sada Mire

This paper deals with the religious traditions and sacred landscapes of the Horn of Africa. I will argue that there are certain continuities in the ritual use of these landscapes. I will study these landscapes through what I term the knowledge approach which focuses on the preservation of skill and knowledge rather than objects. This perspective seems to be vital for many of the people of the Horn and facilitates the continuity of transmission of knowledge, including that of ritual use of the landscape and the relationship between people and place. The paper will also discuss the dynamics of the current political situation in the Horn of Africa and the impact of contested territories on the sacred landscape of Somali territory in particular.

‘Cultivating Heritage under Ethnic Federalism: The regional museum boom in Ethiopia’

Dr Belle Asante Tarsitani

This paper considers how the political environment of Ethiopia influenced multicultural and public expressions of heritage in the last century, and relates the nature of contemporary community engagement in the regional museum context to such political developments. Case studies from Harar will examine the motives of community actors and the regional government in the promotion of heritage preservation, as well as link the expansion of regional museums to a revised federal mandate that endorses the celebration of ethnic identities.

In Harar, private-public collaborations in museums may be seen as contemporary adaptations to regional autonomy in heritage management, wherein sustainable practices are built upon local initiatives and are dependent upon indigenous systems of alliances. The development of activities relating to these culture centers reveal that a variety of actors worked cooperatively to develop a community-relevant museum experience for which Ethiopian citizens are the primary beneficiaries, as visitor statistics and guestbook entries attest. The concentration of museums in the small city center of Harar reflects a burgeoning niche for more regional, inclusive cultural centers whose target audience is native and non-elite.

