

Conserving the Intangible

The Asian African Identity in Kenya

Other publications from the Asian African Heritage Trust
Publications Editor: Villoo Nowrojee

From the Land of Pashtuns to the Land of Maa
Muzzafar Juma Khan

A Select Bibliography of Asian African Writing
Viloo Nowrojee

Glimpses of Kenya's Nationalist Struggle
Pio Gama Pinto

The Autobiography of Makhan Singh
Makhan Singh

Copyright © Pheroze Nowrojee 2015

ISBN 978-9966-1694-5-7

Published by the Asian African Heritage Trust
PO Box 42882-00100
Nairobi, Kenya
www.asianafricanheritage.com

Book design: Edward Miller/Manqa Studio
Text set in Adobe Garamond Pro

Printed in Kenya at Colourprint Limited

CONSERVING THE INTANGIBLE

THE ASIAN AFRICAN IDENTITY IN KENYA

Pheroze Nowrojee



A. Conserving the Intangible

This paper addresses the task of conserving the intangible – in this case, the identity of a community. The setting is within national history and the national heritage; the task itself always as affirmation of Kenya's pluralistic heritage. It records the steps taken by the Asian African community in Kenya in this regard. The experience may provide a template for other individual communities.

The Asian Africans are originally from Asia's Sub-continent (now India and Pakistan), settled in East Africa for over two hundred years. "Travelling individuals and cosmopolitan encounters"¹ are part of what brought about the Asian African presence. References in texts, speech, records or debates refer to them variously as coolies, indentured labourers, Asiatics, Indians, Asians or South Asians, among other labels. But now, with the passing of these centuries, individuals and homes have become filled with a new social identity, simultaneously Asian and African – Asian African in fact. This paper draws on this Asian African experience.

Kenya has a pluralistic heritage drawn from many traditions, including Bantu, Nilotic, Cushite, Semitic, British and an old and continuing Indian Ocean heritage. We share with this last, languages, music, food, dress, customs and faith traditions. Thus, geography as well as history have created Kenya's Asian African heritage.

It was against this background that the Asian African Heritage Trust was set up in 1999, and the exhibition it organized at the National Museums of Kenya was opened in 2000. The *Asian African Heritage Exhibition* was conceived both as a means of self-definition and as a process of sharing and dialogue with fellow Kenyans. Thus, the exhibition was both inward and outward looking, always within the national Kenyan context. Communities drawing upon its example would similarly need to do both.

1 Bertz, Ned, "Indian Ocean World Travellers: Moving Models in Multi-sited Research" in *Journeys and Dwellings: Indian Ocean Themes in South Asia*, Helene Basu, ed. (Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 2008).

It was evident that the racial labelling of the colonial period (to which Kenya still clutches, both formally in administrative practice and informally in popular reference to fellow Kenyans) had become not only outdated but also non-functional. Asian Africans could no longer be defined only by their racial origins. Nor could they be defined only by the cultural practices of their origins, for these were no longer the only cultural practices they lived by. We found that it was numerous and varied influences that defined us as Kenyans and not only our racial/tribal/faith groups. In conserving such new and more complex identities, other groups may also draw on the Asian African experience. Self-definition becomes a tool for both identifying and conserving such identity. The self-definition is made articulate by the contents of an exhibition. Such an exhibition thus displays all these rediscoveries and concepts, and conserves the identity.

The methods used to initiate the processes leading to the first *Asian African Heritage Exhibition* (2000–2005), and then to the upcoming permanent one, are simple enough to be undertaken without any special ethnographic expertise, broad enough to encompass and make welcome a wide number of community members, and practical enough to make an impact within a reasonable time. They could serve as a useful model and best practice.

In the handling, study and presentation of rare objects, fragile objects, objects that reflect the spiritual values of communities or humankind itself, museums pay special attention to the care, respect and conservation necessary to preserve the objects for posterity. So too, wherever there are endangered communities or cultural practices, or explanatory thought that has been consigned to oblivion, similar care, respect and conservation is necessary.

This duty is owed to all communities, but it is a duty particularly meaningful to communities that by history were or are marginalized from power, participation, resources and decision making. Such communities, by reason of these deprivations, are the ones most vulnerable to the steady attrition of their collective memory, their cultural environment, their records, their artefacts, their material culture and their history.

The impact of these losses is severe where conservatory steps are absent. The community loses its cultural bearings, its self-worth, and, often, the records and means to reverse the situation. The number of persons with knowledge of its cultural and faith practices and language drops steeply, to levels that threaten its survival. Its political power becomes negligible; the resultant economic decline turns most often into endemic poverty. The Indigenous Australians have been struggling for centuries to reverse cultural erosion, the ecological decline of their land and the economic marginalization that has been the consequence. Steps therefore need to be taken to prevent irreversible damage leading to the extinction of a people, a way of life, their cultural assets, their language, their religious thought and practices. Vigilance, however tiring, however demanding of fading resources, is needed to nurture retrievability.

These are steps that conserve the intangible, steps no less necessary and no less concrete than steps that conserve an environment or a tangible structure. There are further important national benefits. Dr Peter Okwaro of the Centre for Heritage Development in Africa, based in Kenya, draws attention to the fact that conservation of community heritage leads to social cohesion in both the community and the nation at large.

There are, of course, other steps that protect the abstract identity, values and past of each community. Dr Kalandar Khan, the Director of the Mombasa Old Town Conservation Office, has made the key point that the best way to conserve heritage is to practice it. Other ways, also used by the Asian African Heritage Trust, were and are publications.² The *Asian African Heritage Exhibition* was also the catalyst for a huge amount of creative writing.³

² Support for this was gratefully received from the Ford Foundation, Nairobi. An important and catalytic publication in this programme has been Viloo Nowrojee's *A Select Bibliography of Asian African Writing* (Nairobi, Asian African Heritage Trust, 2014), which, drawing on over a century of writing by the community, has created a wider awareness of the intellectual heritage of the community.

³ A leading example of this is Muzzafar Juma Khan's *From the Land of Pashtuns to the Land of Maa* (Nairobi, Muzzafar Juma Khan/Asian African Heritage Trust, 2013), also referred to below.

Another major project of the Trust is the oral history recording programme,⁴ conserving the richness and diversity of the Asian African community and its many families of mixed Asian and African descent all over the country. The aural and video recording of the voices of older members of the Asian African community of mixed descent, especially in the rural areas, is being systematically undertaken. This is the first attempt by any organization to understand and share the experiences of Asians from the Sub-continent who married into indigenous African communities since before early in the last century. Their descendants are now reflecting on issues of identity and heritage. The interviews are being gathered for a major publication which will have far-reaching implications as the Trust locates and preserves the history, diversity and pluralism of Kenya for future generations. The Ford Foundation's support for this documentation, which constitutes a significant addition to the history of Kenya, has been invaluable and is truly visionary.

Another valuable example of other steps has been the Community Peace Museums Programme of the Mennonite Central Committee of Kenya, one of the most important initiatives in Kenya for the conservation of a key element of national unity and progress. Since 1994, it has covered twenty-four peoples of Kenya and focused on the material and oral aspects of their peace-building traditions. The Mennonite Central Committee has noted that among these communities have been pastoralists and agriculturists, and have included Nilotic, Bantu and Cushite peoples practicing between them Christian, Islamic and traditional African faiths. Peace trees are an important part of the process: "Among almost all the peoples of Eastern Africa there are trees under whose shade the elders meet to negotiate reconciliation and whose branches and leaves are used for blessings of peace and prosperity."⁵

The preservation of identity, culture and heritage, the protection of the music of a society, the preservation of the evidence of crimes against a community (as of the Jewish Holocaust), and other steps in defence of the abstract, also generate

4 This was also supported by the Ford Foundation, Nairobi. This programme is led by Muzzafar Juma Khan, whose own book on his family *From the Land of Pashtuns to the Land of Maa* (Nairobi, Muzzafar Juma Khan/Asian African Heritage Trust, 2013) is an important account of Kenyan public affairs, as well as a path-breaking retrieval of family history.

5 Somjee, Sultan, *Healing at Othaya* (Private Communication, 5th March 2001).

a repudiation of negative trends. Examples are the necessity to reverse the denial of the return of its extant records which are out of a community's control (as in Palestine), and the rejection of the concept of Bantustans (in apartheid South Africa), of Reservations (in the United States), of Native Reserves (in British colonies in Africa) and of concentration camps of any sort, anywhere.

Preservation involves, too, a corrective of past negative actions. Reading history, literature or records of any colonial period, we can now more easily see who are left out than who were placed in these narratives. Looking, too, at their representative images, we also quickly notice who are not in the centre of the visual field. This is 'erasure' – the intentional or unintentional omission of whole peoples significant to a fair rendering of the truth of the time.⁶ In the conception of the *Asian African Heritage Exhibition*, the Trust considered the correction of erasure not as a new way of looking at old information, but as a just way of doing so.

B. The International Duty

UNESCO's World Heritage Sites are internationally promoted examples. UNESCO has identified World Heritage Sites all over the globe. These may consist of natural sites (Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe/Zambia) or human-built structures (the Giza Pyramids, Egypt; the Taj Mahal, India). But they also include places which are not architecturally significant, but are sites or structures that are evidence of a people's culture (Lamu, Kenya) or significant events in their past. An example of this last, of relevance here, is referred to later.

The *World Heritage Convention*⁷ provides expressly for conservation of the intangible. It provides for the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission of the world's cultural and natural heritage, for

⁶ See Prown, Jules David, Nancy K. Anderson, William Cronon, Brian W. Dippie, Martha A. Sandweiss, Susan Prendergast Schoelwer, and Howard A. Lamar, *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts* (New Haven, Yale University Press/Yale University Art Gallery, 1994).

⁷ *The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (United Nations, 1972); whc.unesco.org/en/convention.

the benefit of future generations. The Convention does not specifically define ‘conservation’; this allows implementation through a wide number and variety of measures. The Mission Statement of UNESCO also underlines the importance of “encouraging participation of the local population in the preservation of their cultural and natural heritage”.

These are acknowledgements of the international duty to conserve the world’s cultural and natural heritage, and of the international cooperation required to conserve the intangible; and conversely, an acknowledgement of the national duty to international institutions (such as UNESCO), to adhere to and comply with the provisions of international conventions and treaties.

C. The National Duty: The Legal Structure for Conserving the Intangible

Conservation is a national duty as well. Many national constitutions and statutes spell out that duty. They provide the legal framework for the conservation of the intangible. The Kenyan examples are set out below.

The Constitution of Kenya⁸ provides the principal and national expression of the concept of conserving the intangible. **Article 11** makes an explicit statement of the pre-eminence of the abstract:

“**11.** (1) This Constitution recognises culture as the foundation of the nation and as the cumulative civilization of the Kenyan people and nation.

(2) The State shall—

- (a) promote all forms of national and cultural expression through literature, the arts, traditional celebrations, science, communication, information, mass media, publications, libraries and other cultural heritage;

⁸ *The Constitution of Kenya* (Nairobi, Government Printer, 2010).

- (b) recognise the role of science and indigenous technologies in the development of the nation; and
- (c) promote the intellectual property rights of the people of Kenya.

(3) Parliament shall enact legislation to—

- (a) ensure that communities receive compensation or royalties for the use of their cultures and cultural heritage; and
- (b) recognise and protect the ownership of indigenous seeds and plant varieties, their genetic and diverse characteristics and their use by the communities of Kenya.

Art. 44 (cited in part here) further consolidates the protections to language and culture:

“**44.** (1) Every person has a right to use the language, and to participate in the cultural life, of the person’s choice.

(2) A person belonging to a cultural or linguistic community has the right, with other members of that community—

- (a) to enjoy the person’s culture and use the person’s language; or
- (b) to form, join and maintain cultural and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society.”

The national values are set out in **Art. 10**, and include human dignity, equity, social justice, inclusiveness, equality, human rights, non-discrimination, protection of the marginalized and national unity. These are intangible concepts and rights that directly affect the conserving of identity and the protection of cultural beliefs and feelings.

Other provisions of the Constitution pay special attention to minorities and marginalized groups. **Art. 56** (cited in part here) provides as follows:

“**56.** The State shall put in place affirmative action programmes designed to ensure that minorities and marginalised groups—

- (a) participate and are represented in governance and other spheres of life...
- (d) develop their cultural values, languages and practices...”

“Marginalized group” is defined in **Art. 260** as “a group of people, who, because of laws or practices before, on, or after the effective date [27th August 2010], were or are disadvantaged by discrimination on one or more of the grounds in Article 27(4).”

“Marginalized community” is defined in the same Article, **Art. 260**, as meaning:

“(a) a community that, because of its relatively small population or for any other reason, has been unable to fully participate in the integrated social and economic life of Kenya as a whole;

(b) a traditional community that, out of a need or desire to preserve its unique culture and identity from assimilation, has remained outside the integrated social and economic life of Kenya as a whole;

(c) an indigenous community that has retained and maintained a traditional lifestyle and livelihood based on a hunter or gatherer economy; or

(d) pastoral persons and communities, whether they are—

(i) nomadic; or

(ii) a settled community that, because of its relative geographic isolation, has experienced only marginal participation in the integrated social and economic life of Kenya as a whole.”

These are some of the provisions that deal with the danger to neglected cultures, languages and peoples. This is necessary in a country with diverse communities and diverse pasts. The Constitution provides a framework for dealing with such threats and thus for conserving the intangible.

Statutes supporting the above constitutional principles and protections include the **National Museums and Heritage Act, Cap. 216**.⁹ The provisions of this Act are in concord with the above requirements of the 2010 Constitution of Kenya. Section 4 of the Act sets out the functions of the National Museums of Kenya. In particular, the following provisions of the Act are relevant here:

“4. The National Museums shall—

- (a) identify, protect, conserve and transmit the cultural and natural heritage of Kenya; and
- (b) promote cultural resources in the context of social and economic development.”

“Heritage”, “cultural heritage”, and “natural heritage” are all defined in Section 2 of the Act.

In addition to the National Museums and Heritage Act, Cap. 216, the forthcoming **National Culture Bill** is in stages of consultation before coming before Parliament. Its envisaged object is “to give effect to Article 11 of the Constitution [see above], to the National Policy on Culture on the promotion, protection, conservation and presentation of cultural heritage and to provide for the establishment of the National Council for Culture and Arts”. The intention is to protect the “spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features” of all social groups, and to “safeguard tangible and intangible cultural heritage”.

D. The Asian African Experience

In May 1997, Dr Mohamed Isahakia, the Director-General of the National Museums of Kenya, gave an address to members of the public at the Louis

⁹ *National Museums and Heritage Act, Cap. 216 (Rev. 2009)*, first enacted as Act No. 6 of 2006. This Act, enacted before the 2010 Constitution of Kenya, is under review and may be replaced by new legislation to ensure more complete concordance with the various provisions of the Constitution.

Leakey Memorial Hall of the Nairobi National Museum.¹⁰ The important speech dealt with the role of the National Museums of Kenya in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nature of Kenyan society. He dealt in particular with the minority communities.

Against the backdrop of a repressive regime and prevailing human rights violations, Dr Isahakia identified “the need to step out from the fear of censorship to open our museums to braver and a better researched history of all Kenyans, presented with greater imagination and real regard for minorities”.¹¹ In particular, the Director-General addressed the Asian African community: “Almost 34 years after Independence our National Museum here has no part in its entire exhibitions focusing on any aspect of Asian history. This must be corrected. However, to achieve this, the preservation and presentation of Asian history in Kenya must be a critical concern to the Asian community itself. The question of the depth and the breadth of your accomplishments in the social, economic, educational and political developments of the past must play an important part in defining your status in this country.”¹²

Further, Dr Isahakia pointed out: “However, critical to this process should be the effort of the Asian community to preserve its history in this region and to create institutions for its interpretation and to insist its history has a rightful place in this country. In my view, all Kenyans and non-Kenyans in this country would stand to benefit.”¹³

This was also in line with the development in museum planning that the responsibility and effort of such steps in preservation and presentation have now partly to be devolved from the central government and the central museum network to the respective communities themselves in a shared effort. The Director-General accordingly proposed community discussion on such presentation and

10 Isahakia, Dr Mohamed, *The Asian African Museum Project*, public address, Louis Leakey Memorial Hall, 10th May 1997.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

its modalities – whether through an advisory committee to the Museum, or by a separate Asian African Museum, or by a temporary or permanent exhibit in the present galleries. An interim committee was established. It was decided that the first step would be a temporary exhibition devoted to the community's heritage in Kenya.

Apart from the gathering and selection of material objects, oral history and photographs, the committee determined that the absence of a clear identity for the community in a changed and changing Kenya was the principal danger. The danger was that, if unaddressed, the conflicting labels by which the community was presently known would lead to social distancing from fellow Kenyans, to alienation within the community itself, and to disinterest on the part of national leaders and government in correcting such adverse trends. Such trends would confirm the drift away from the tolerance and inclusivity that the plurality of Kenya's reality demanded.

The dangers to the community itself, again if unaddressed, were that of a community unsure of its role in Kenya, with no sense of belonging and no sense of self-worth. It would then take the easiest route to respond to the resultant racial challenge – disengagement from the nation's politics, even though those unattractive politics adversely affected the community deeply and continually. It would become a conflicted part of the nation, torn between deep attachment and deep withdrawal.

In addition, there was need to be conscious, as Gabriel Abraham observes, of whether the community was preserving its identity or variants of the identity it had originally come with; and whether there may have been no single identity at origin, and that those multi-identities may now have become funnelled into fewer and changed identities in Kenya.

Self-definition of the changed identity was the principal need. The need arose from a century of colonial labelling that was racial, that carried derogatory connotations, that was discriminatory, and that was perpetuated after

independence by a deliberate shutting out of the Asian African part of Kenya's history. The community had been erased from the primary and secondary school curricula and from university areas of study and research. No Kenyan students learned of the story of the presence of this active group.

These factors led to an intensive debate within the Asian African community over the next three years (1997–1999), seeking clarity, unity and organization, and community education about itself. The debate gained from the National Museums of Kenya's policy of inclusiveness and the conceptual, technical and logistical support that was extended first by Director-General Dr Isahakia and then by his successors in office, Dr George Abungu, Dr Idle Farah, and their staff, as well as by the Board of Directors and their Chairs, Prof. Geoffrey ole Maloy and Hon. Issa Timamy.

Dr Sultan Somjee, then Head of the Ethnographic Division of the National Museums and curator of the intended exhibition, argued that the community thus needed to define its social identity by itself. He defined the community as Asian African. He wrote, "For it is also my human right to practice and enjoy my bi-continental tradition. I hold the Indian Ocean culture of my Asian ancestors and their African descendants. That has made my family Asian African."¹⁴ The debate indeed confirmed that time and history had changed the community's position in Kenya and thus its social identity within the country. Principally, the community was now an amalgam reflecting both its origins in Asia and its past two centuries in Africa.

The exhibition accordingly opened as *The Asian African Heritage Exhibition* in February 2000 in one gallery of the Nairobi National Museum. Our experience was that the community's final self-definition of identity as Asian Africans determined the themes and contents of the exhibition. One part of the self-definition was that that process and its material manifestations, whether exhibition, book or photographic record, had to emerge initially from within the community itself.

¹⁴ Somjee, Sultan, *The Asian African Exhibition Opening Address*, February 2000.

One of the best protections of the intangible concept of a community's identity is if it is self-determined. Defining and conserving is not an external event by others, whether state authorities or outside helpers. It is an active internalization by the community itself of its redefined or reasserted identity and the active shedding of the preceding labels imposed by tyranny, occupation, subordination, colonization or other cultural domination.

Hence the rejection by many Indians and persons of Indo-Pakistani origin of the term 'South Asians' applied to them by persons other than themselves, particularly from the West, including in academic and political writing, and in the media. It is labelling by persons other than the communities themselves. It robs diverse peoples of identity. It is a highly political act, with the effect, intended or otherwise, of making them faceless. Many examples speak to this. The dark experiences of the African American community in the U.S.A., of the Indigenous Australian community, and of the Dalit community in India, following on their earlier labelling by other communities, are grave warnings of the consequences of this practice. It is well to recall what James Baldwin said about this situation, more than half a century ago: "All you are ever told in this country [the U.S.A.] about being black is that it is a terrible thing to be. Now, in order to survive this, you have to dig down into yourself and re-create yourself, really, according to no image which yet exists in America. You have to impose, in fact – this may sound very strange – you have to decide who you are, and force the world to deal with you, not with its idea of you."¹⁵

One part of that restoration of dignity, self-worth and reparation is new definition and self-definition, events which, not coincidentally, took place, and had to take place, in each of the above three communities. The struggle to get this done is part of the struggle of restoration.

The *Asian African Heritage Exhibition* in Nairobi met with huge national and international approval. The Exhibition was scheduled as a six-month temporary exhibition from February 2000. It lasted instead for five years until 2005. It

¹⁵ *Conversations with James Baldwin*, Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt, eds. (University of Mississippi, 1989), pages 5–6. Interview by Studs Terkel, 1961.

was a major draw at the Museum throughout that period. For Asian Africans, it marked national recognition as an integral part of the nation. This was acknowledgement of an unrequited love for the country. It gave self-worth and a sense of belonging.

The Asian African community's deliberations and decisions on the Exhibition in Kenya found affirmation in the declaration a few years later by UNESCO of a World Heritage Site in Mauritius honouring the indentured labourers from India. The first indentured labourers from India left Calcutta (Kolkata) in 1838, and landed then and thereafter in Mauritius throughout that century, some to work there in the sugar fields and others to trans-ship on to Reunion, Fiji, Trinidad, British Guiana, Jamaica, French Guiana, St. Vincent, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Bermuda, Dutch Guiana, Barbados and South Africa. This landing place in Port Louis, Mauritius, was inscribed in 2006 as a World Heritage Site. It is called the Aapravasi Ghat.

The UNESCO citation records:

“The buildings of the Aapravasi Ghat [the remains of an immigration depot of 1849], are among the earliest explicit manifestations of what was to become a global economic system [based on their labours], and one of the greatest migrations in history.

“This sole surviving example of this unique modern diaspora... represents not only the development of the modern system of contractual labour, but also the memories, traditions and values that these men, women and children carried with them when they left their countries of origin to work in foreign lands and subsequently bequeathed to their millions of descendants for whom the site holds great symbolic meaning.”¹⁶

The foundation of the upcountry settlement of Asian Africans in Kenya had also been of indentured labourers from India, this time for the construction of the

16 whc.unesco.org/en/list/1227

railway from Mombasa to Kisumu over the years 1896 to 1903. The UNESCO citation is an example of the fulfilment of the international duty to conserve the collective memories, the intangible values and the worth of peoples.

Fellow Kenyans overwhelmingly responded positively to the *Asian African Heritage Exhibition*: “This is a rich history which must be preserved.” (Governor, Central Bank of Kenya); “Great! My perception of Indians has greatly changed.” (Member of the public); “This is Kenyan Heritage. Must be preserved.” (University professor); “Excellent. The community has come of age. Ready to stand with the rest of Kenyans without complex.” (Former Member of Parliament). A South African visitor observed, “Valuable contribution to intercultural ideas.” Asian Africans themselves reacted emotionally: “At last, I have a way of describing my identity. At last the Asian and the African parts in me are in harmony.”; “The void in my heart has been filled. Excellent.”; “Thank you for correcting the record.”; “I was actually in tears when I saw the pictures.”; “A valuable and much needed insight into our community.”¹⁷

Most visitors saw the exhibits as welcome information about the country, as much as about this community. The display was not seen as the exotica of a marginalized community, nor of a community of outsiders here on sufferance. A very important part of the extremely large number of visitors to the exhibit over those five years was the busloads of schoolchildren who came from all over the country.

This positive response led to the conversion of the 2000–2005 temporary exhibition into a permanent exhibit at the Museum. It was President Mwai Kibaki who authorized this, stating the following:

“In order to promote cross-cultural understanding in our country, I have authorized and supported the establishment of the *Asian African Heritage Exhibition* in a permanent purpose-built exhibition hall at the National Museum

¹⁷ For these and more responses, see Neera Kapila’s *Visitors’ Views – The Asian African Heritage Exhibition: History and Identity*, Voice of EACA (August 2000), pages 12–13.

in Nairobi. This exhibition traces the history of the Asian community in Kenya over the last 200 years and documents their role in nation building.”¹⁸

A major result of such a process is that each community begins to view others and itself on the equal basis of a human rights approach, and not in the context of unequal majority–minority, ruler–ruled, wealthy–poor, master–servant and other similar marginalizing power relationships.

The Exhibition had kept in mind three important concerns: it had addressed itself to the Asian African community, it had addressed itself to fellow Kenyans, and thirdly, it had particularized and detailed the Asian African community within the national context and within Kenyan history. These are important parameters in the template for the preservation of the intangible.

E. Tolerance, Plurality and Diversity

The exhibition spoke to Kenyans not just of one Kenyan sub-community, the Asian Africans, but, by holding up the exhibition as an example of what could be done, recalled to all the need to examine the part of the Kenyan sub-communities in the history of Kenya. It thereby reminded all Kenyans of Kenya’s diversity and plurality and its centuries-long record of tolerance. Indeed, it is this pluralistic ethic of respecting the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic diversity in Kenya that makes the nation strong, as opposed to positions of ethnic chauvinism or the private maintenance of definitions and labels about others that promote conflict and misunderstanding, and lead directly to national disunity. Most of these attitudes arise from insufficient information about each other. The approach and the presentations of the National Museums of Kenya correct this, and give value and leadership to the idea of diversity as a genuine source of the common good and a foundation for civic cohesion and national unity.

¹⁸ President Mwai Kibaki, *Speech at the 23rd Anniversary of the Asian Foundation*, Loresho, Nairobi, 2nd February 2013.

Tolerance requires leadership. For, as the Aga Khan has noted, “There is a human impulse, it seems – fed by fear – to define ‘identity’ in negative terms. We often determine ‘who we are’ by determining who we are against...This fragmenting impulse not only separates peoples from one another, it also sub-divides communities – and then it sub-divides the sub-divisions...But the human inclination to divisiveness is accompanied, I deeply believe, by a profound human impulse to bridge divisions. And often the more secure we are in our own identities, the more effective we can be in reaching out to others. If our animosities are born out of fear, then confident generosity is born out of hope...[T]he replacement of fear by hope is probably the single most powerful trampoline of progress.”¹⁹

Conserving the intangible thus has practical application. It is not simply a container for vague exhortations. “The central value we have to nurture in our diverse country is tolerance. We generate it by a sense of self-worth in each and every community, together with a sense of shared pride in the achievements of every other community, placing these values in the context of national achievement.”²⁰ Conservation of the intangible matters referred to earlier are thus a key aspect in the engendering and sustaining of tolerance within a nation.

The Preamble to the Constitution of Kenya reflects all this. A relevant part of the Preamble states:

“We, the people of Kenya—...

PROUD of our ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, and determined to live in peace and unity as one indivisible sovereign nation...”

This statement in our Constitution reflects our history, which shows that each of our peoples has contributed to all the others. Our ethnic, cultural and religious

19 HH the Aga Khan, *Address upon Receiving the Tolerance Award of the Tutzing Evangelical Academy*, Tutzing, Germany, 20th May 2006.

20 Nowrojee, Pheroze, *Heritage and the New Constitution*, Paper to the Annual Curators’ Seminar, National Museums of Kenya, Embu, 8th March 2012.

diversity itself generates tolerance and a rejection of the use by one community of its achievements as a basis for domination over other Kenyans. Rather, we have wanted the cumulative enrichment that all communities bring to the nation. The National Museums of Kenya, through presentations such as the *Asian African Heritage Exhibition* and others at its various museums around the country, is at the heart of this synthesizing and healing process, especially at times when aberrations predominate.

In a period of the increasing negative political use of ethnicity, such presentations are also a reminder of the need for inclusivity and the avoidance of locking communities into an 'us versus them' mentality. The Asian African Heritage Gallery demonstrates a template that can be shared by all communities eager to look both inwards and outwards in articulating their identities and cultural underpinnings, while yet staying true to the national values and history. Although these are abstract notions, they reflect and validate the immense importance of conserving the values of identity and heritage.

F. Conclusion

The Asian African community is not the only Kenyan community that is displayed in a gallery in the National Museums of Kenya. Placing and presenting Kenyan communities within the national context through its galleries has been the National Museums' policy for decades. The National Museums of Kenya have 22 other museums all over the country. Our colonial heritage is displayed in the Karen Blixen Museum in Karen, Nairobi. The Meru community is reflected in the Museum in Meru town. Rabai Museum conserves the values and artefacts of Christian beginnings in Kenya with Rebmann and Krapf. The Kisumu Museum conserves the culture of the Luo peoples. Fort Jesus in Mombasa conserves the culture of the Coast, as does Lamu Museum and Malindi Museum. Fort Jesus also preserves the Portuguese past and the Omani connection. Nyeri Museum collects and preserves the achievements of the Mau Mau freedom fighters.

Kakamega Museum reflects Luhya culture. Gede Museum conserves our Islamic past. A Rendille Museum has been established by the community. The *Njuri Ncheke* Elders of the Meru are planning to establish a cultural centre to preserve and promote Meru heritage, and its first phase has been completed.²¹ Each of these and the other museums of the National Museums of Kenya conserve the intangible relating to the many communities of Kenya.

Active steps within communities themselves, inclusive museum policies, national pluralism, school curricula, educational programmes and tolerance are all vital in moving marginalized communities out of attendant poverty into a more acknowledged and shared part of the nation's social life. The museum's role is to prevent oblivion, to offer a national stage, to bring self-worth to all, and to enable the revival of spiritual lifeblood, to return to each community the remembrance of their share of honour in the nation's past and their right to dignity in its future.



²¹ *Sunday Nation*, Nairobi, 2nd November 2014, p. 35.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Dr Azim Nanji, Dr Kalandar Khan (Mombasa Old Town Conservation Office and the National Museums of Kenya), Gabriel Abraham (development architect and urban planner), Dr Peter Okwaro (Centre for Heritage Development in Africa and the National Museums of Kenya) and others in the preparation of this paper.