

REPORT ON THE MAASAI LIVING CULTURES PROGRAM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ARTEFACT REPATRIATION

To: Dr. Fredrick Manthi – Director Antiquities, Sites and Monuments, NMK.
From: Evelyne Muturi, Marketing Officer, National Museums of Kenya
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Subject: Reflections on the Maasai Living Cultures Program at the Pitt Rivers Museum



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Introduction

The Maasai *Living Cultures* Project is a collaborative project between representatives of the Kenyan and Tanzanian Maasai community and the Pitt Rivers Museum. It aims to build trust and address concerns about the portrayal of Maasai culture in museums. It aims to foster knowledge exchange and collaboration between the Maasai community and UK museums and to build relationships based on respect, trust, and deeper understanding.

The process was started in partnership with [InsightShare](#), a community development organization working with Indigenous people worldwide to address key issues through Participatory Video. The project has also led to the establishment the Pan-African Living Cultures Alliance (PALCA), a regional network enabling more communities to document their knowledge systems, cultural practices, crafts, languages, and traditional technologies. Other UK museums have joined the project since 2020, including the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology (MAA) at Cambridge, the Horniman Museum in London and since 2023 and the Museum of English Rural Life at Reading University.

I recently attended a seminar representing the National Museums of Kenya at the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) as part of the culmination of the Maasai Living Cultures Program, an engagement between PRM and Maasai community representatives. This program reflects PRM's commitment to critically re-evaluating its collection practices and strengthening relationships with communities whose cultural artefacts are housed in their collection. This report provides a summary of the program's background, the seminar events from September 23–30, 2024, and recommendations for NMK's next steps in pursuing artefact restitution and cultural preservation efforts.

National Museums of Kenya (NMK) is a state corporation established by an Act of Parliament, the Museums and Heritage Act 2006. NMK is a multi-disciplinary institution whose role is **to collect, preserve, study, document** and present Kenya's past and present cultural and natural heritage. This is for the purposes of enhancing knowledge, appreciation, respect and sustainable utilization of these resources for the benefit of Kenya and the world, for now and posterity. <https://museums.or.ke>

Background: Origins of the Living Cultures Program

The Maasai Living Cultures Program originated after a 2017 visit by Maasai leaders to the Pitt Rivers Museum. During their tour, the leaders discovered certain objects displayed as Maasai “artefacts” that held deep spiritual significance within their culture, representing ancestral leaders and viewed as sacred. This discovery raised critical questions about how these items had been acquired, preserved and displayed without appropriate cultural context or permission.

In November 2017 and 2018, Maasai delegates visited the Museum to discuss the care of their objects, following their statement that they were concerned and “annoyed” about the objects’ presence in the Museum, framing Maasai culture as though it was in the past. In fact, Maasai groups in Kenya and Tanzania are actively resisting the erosion of their land and culture.

In response, PRM opened a dialogue with the Maasai representatives to explore the origins of these objects and the broader issues of artefact acquisition and preservation. During a follow-up tour of the museum’s basement storage area, Maasai leaders identified five additional items belonging to their community: three from Maasai communities in Tanzania and two from those in Kenya. Recognizing these artefacts led to a continuing series of conversations, resulting in the Maasai Living Cultures Program. This initiative aimed to connect with the families from whom the artefacts had originally been taken and owners killed and to collaborate on the future care of these culturally significant objects.

Special Acknowledgements

- *Pitts Rivers Museum*
- *Dr. Fredrick Manthi*
- *Prof. John Gowlett*
- *Rtd. Judge Peter Hubert*
- *National Museums of Kenya*

I wish to extend sincere thanks to the [Pitt Rivers Museum](#) for their invitation to attend and participate in this meaningful seminar. Their hospitality and openness to dialogue have been instrumental in advancing these critical conversations on artefact restitution and cultural sensitivity.

I am forever thankful to [Dr. Fredrick Manthi](#) for his continuous support and facilitation of my travel arrangements, which made my attendance possible.

Additionally, I am most grateful to [Prof. John Gowllett](#), whose generous funding enabled my participation in the seminar and provided essential resources for this collaborative engagement.

Last but not least, my deepest gratitude goes to [Rtd. Judge Peter Hubert](#), CEO of Bandung Africa and Chairman of the Global Action for Restitution for his collective support which highlights the dedication of international members and organizations as well as academic partners to fostering a respectful and progressive approach to heritage repatriation.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the National Museums of Kenya for supporting me to represent the institution during this seminar.

[The Seminar and Community Interactions with the Artefacts](#)

From September 23–30, 2024, I participated in a seminar at PRM as a representative of the National Museums of Kenya. This seminar marked a key milestone in an emotional and complex journey for the Maasai families who traced their ancestral belongings to this institution. Representatives from each identified family were invited to examine the objects, verify their authenticity, understand the historical circumstances surrounding their acquisition, and decide whether to reclaim the artefacts or allow them to remain in PRM's collection.

Throughout the week, the families engaged closely with the artefacts, sharing oral histories, correcting inaccuracies in the narratives displayed alongside them, and deliberating on their cultural significance. Ultimately, contrary to initial expectations, the families chose to allow the artefacts to remain at PRM. Their decision was based on the belief that these items could serve as valuable educational tools, promoting understanding and appreciation of African heritage on an international platform.

[Reflections and Questions for Future Repatriation Efforts](#)

The Maasai Living Cultures Program serves as a successful model for collaborative relationships between museums and the communities from whom their collections originate. Nevertheless, it raises critical questions about the ethics, logistics, and cultural impact of artefact restitution:

1. **The Scale of Kenyan Artefacts Abroad:** PRM's database reveals that over 24,000 Kenyan artefacts are currently held within its collection. This seminar compels us to

ask: *Should we embark on a broader restitution process to reclaim these items? If so, which artefacts should take priority, and on what grounds?*

2. **Challenges of Repatriation and Conservation:** Artefact repatriation is a complex undertaking that involves logistical, financial, and ethical considerations. Are we, for instance, equipped with the resources and infrastructure to conserve, protect, and display these artefacts in a manner that respects their cultural significance if they were returned? Additionally, are we prepared to tell the original stories that were once tied to these artefacts, especially in cases where information has been altered or lost?
3. **International Cooperation and Policy Development:** The process of repatriation will likely necessitate international partnerships with museums and governments abroad. Negotiating terms for potential returns, creating frameworks for future loans or co-stewardship agreements, and establishing restitution policies are all essential steps in building trust and facilitating artefact returns

Next Steps and Recommendations

Building on the insights from the Maasai Living Cultures Program, I recommend that NMK consider the following steps:

1. **Comprehensive Review of Kenyan Artefacts Abroad:** Initiate a detailed assessment of Kenyan artefacts held in foreign museums, beginning with institutions like PRM, which have demonstrated openness to dialogue on artefact stewardship. This audit should include artefact origins, acquisition history, and cultural significance.
2. **Strengthening Conservation and Preservation Infrastructure:** Invest in the necessary resources, training, and infrastructure to ensure that if artefacts are repatriated, they can be preserved, displayed, and contextualized in a way that honors their heritage.
3. **Building a Framework for Digital Storytelling:** Develop a digital platform that can tell the true histories and stories of these artefacts, accessible both to the Kenyan public and globally. This could include:
 - **Online Exhibits and Virtual Tours:** Develop immersive, interactive online exhibits that showcase Kenyan artefacts in museums around the world. Digital storytelling techniques such as 3D models, augmented reality, and interactive timelines can bring artefacts and their narratives to life.
 - **Community-Led Content Creation:** Invite Kenyan communities to contribute their knowledge, stories, and perspectives through recorded interviews, narratives, and artwork, building a comprehensive digital repository of Kenyan cultural history.

- **Educational Resources for Global Audiences:** Create educational materials that inform international audiences about the cultural importance of these artefacts. This could include video series, articles, and interactive workshops for schools and museums.
- 4. **Engaging with International Museums on Restitution Policies:** Initiate dialogues with other museums and cultural institutions, leveraging the Maasai Living Cultures Program as an example of collaborative and ethical stewardship. These discussions could inform policies that support future artefact repatriation and establish frameworks for co-curation or educational loans when direct repatriation is not feasible.
- 5. **Local Community Involvement in Decision-Making:** Engage Kenyan communities and traditional knowledge holders in discussions surrounding artefact restitution. Their insights are invaluable for authentically representing cultural heritage and ensuring that artefacts retain their original significance.

Conclusion

The Maasai Living Cultures Program underscores the importance of culturally sensitive and ethical approaches to museum collections, fostering collaboration and mutual respect.

The decision by *Maasai families* to keep their ancestral artefacts at PRM emphasizes that reclamation can take various forms, often beyond physical repatriation.

Moving forward, *NMK* can build on this experience to advance respectful, culturally informed artefact restitution efforts, utilizing both physical and digital means to preserve and share Kenyan heritage.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this program. I look forward to discussing our next steps and further strategies for engaging overseas institutions on these important issues.



What are the five culturally sensitive objects?

The objects identified as being culturally sensitive are:

1. [Engononkoi Narok](#) - A hereditary necklace of blue beads passed from father to son, a crucial element of initiation ceremonies. It should never be sold or given away. It is a sacred spiritual ornament that represents a generational lineage (Accession number: 1904.34.25) Collector: Alfred Claud Hollis
2. [Emonyorit](#) - Earring worn by young women after circumcision, reconfigured into a neck ornament after marriage. It would never stay permanently in this state. (Accession number: 1904.34.36) Collector: Alfred Claud Hollis
3. [Orkatar/Orkataar](#) - Hereditary bracelet passed from father to son, which should never be sold or given away. (Accession number: 1904.34.38.1-2) Collector: Alfred Claud Hollis
4. [Isikira](#) - Head ornament worn by newly circumcised girls. It can only be used by one specific person and would always be dismantled after use. It can never be borrowed, sold or given away. (Accession number: 1927.84.51) Collector: Rev. William Ernest Taylor
5. [Isurutia](#) - Hereditary woman's arm/neck ornament which represents the sacred bond of marriage. It can never be borrowed, sold or given away. (Accession number: 1996.21.77) Collector: Phoebe Somers





<https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/maasai-living-cultures>

About the Author

Since May 2019, as a Marketing Senior Officer at the National Museum of Kenya, I have developed and executed marketing strategies for exhibitions, partnerships, events, and community initiatives, significantly enhancing the museum's local and international brand presence.

I manage traditional, digital, and social media campaigns, oversee the production of marketing materials, and collaborate with neighboring museums on promotional strategies. By cultivating relationships with media, sponsors, and stakeholders,

I have maximized revenue potential and secured strategic partnerships aligned with the museum's goals. Additionally, I coordinate with internal departments to ensure cohesive marketing efforts and regularly analyze the impact of campaigns to inform future strategies.

I have an undergraduate Bachelors degree in Business Administration from the University of Wales U.K and currently pursuing a Masters in Business Administration at Mount Kenya University.

Accomplishments:

- Joined Global Action for Restitution Group formed in 2023 to discuss and implement an international campaign to restore African Artefacts to their rightful place on the continent.
- Orchestrated the IGNITE CULTURE Uzinduzi project funded by HEVAFUND where the objective was to equip eleven grassroots community groups within Western Kenya Region with entrepreneurial skills and enhance financial literacy as well as required legalities through workshops and creative activities.
- Led planning, coordination and execution of a successful Taste of Africa cultural festival in California funded by Cheza Nami Foundation in Oct 2023, showcasing National Museums of Kenya. Collaborated with stakeholders, managed all aspects of the project, curated engaging exhibitions and managed teams. The event garnered over 3,000 attendees receiving acclaim from participants and media and commended by NMK for creative presentation.
- In 2022-2023, as a Project Coordinator for a digitization project, funded by Tourism Promotion Fund where responsibilities included overseeing the planning, execution and completion of museum mobile application, learning management system and virtual reality components within scope, budget and timeline constraints. This involved stakeholder communication, requirement gathering, user management, risk mitigation, progress tracking and documentation to ensure successful project delivery and stakeholder satisfaction.
- Grew museum gallery revenue by 11% in 2019 through showcasing different art exhibitions and events
- Successfully overseen development and implementation of six different programs of school going children, building culture and heritage knowledge both on ground and virtually in 2020 through COVID until 2021

- Succeeded in online training of other national museum staff on virtual museum visits and guides
- Attended differently themed conferences and workshops mainly on sustainability of economic transformations
- Successfully developed the signature brochure outlook and content to be used across all museums countrywide
- Designed and implemented effective territory management strategies that saw my team deliver above expectations and get commended thrice for target achievement.
- In 2014, achieved the highest customer acquisition rate in the country's account zone.
- Recipient of Recognition Award in October 2014 for being the highest target achieved zone.
- Grew sales volume by 18% through market penetration and market diversification
- Grew sales by 26% through onboarding of merchants