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Even if the objects presented in this article (with the exception of one from the colonial era) are still widely used in the places they come from, these particular examples have been retired from actual use. They are museum pieces, whose only contact with human beings is the white cotton gloves of a curator. Once robust utensils in everyday use, they now spend their days under lock and key on a dust-free shelf in a climate-controlled repository. In their former lives they would quickly be replaced when they wore out; now they are preserved for all perpetuity. In the museum they serve a new purpose, namely, to give us insights into the lives of people in the Kerio Valley, Ukambani and other places.

Wilhelm Östberg
Translated from Swedish by Charly Hultén

Museum pieces: Life once removed

We often use things to say who we are. If that armchair, this or that car, or a favourite teacup says a lot about city folk, isn’t it only reasonable that things like a goblet from Marakwet, baskets from Ukambani or an embellished gourd would have a lot to tell us about life in rural Kenya?
The fact that they were items of everyday life by no means implies that they cannot have a deeper significance. One of the following stories tells of a number of family heirlooms now stored in museum warehouses and the moral dilemma they posed – and continue to pose – to those who acquired them. Was it right to purchase objects that had great meaning to their owners, who were anxious to sell them only because their situation forced them to part with whatever they had that could fetch a price? It was a situation, totally unforeseen, where we were forced to think on our feet and make a decision: to buy or to refrain.

Most acquisitions are uncontroversial. But still, when you enter a storeroom and see necklaces with red, yellow, orange, blue and green beads, each lying in protective tissue paper and stacked one on top of the other in an oxygen-free carton, one of hundreds of such cartons in long rows of cabinets, there’s no denying that one feels a little sad. It is dark and quiet in the repository; the humidity of the air is regulated. Each necklace has been numbered, described, photographed and registered in the museum’s database. Everything is efficiently managed, well organised. In the museum I see necklaces we acquired in the Kerio Valley. They would be gleaming in the sunshine, worn by eager and enthusiastic women on their way to a market or a ceremonial event. They flashed with colour, pride and wealth. And here they lie, in the silent dusk of the storeroom. Of course, there are plenty of beaded necklaces in the Kerio Valley; the ones we collected are by no means precious rarities. But each necklace was a bearer of dreams, and of tradition. Someone had put aside money (not easy to come by in the Kerio Valley) in order to buy the beads in a duka or at a market; had sat hours sewing the beads in place, to make a necklace she was planning to wear at a particular event, or give as a present to a young relative. Can a museum be a keeper of dreams?

In the shadowed alleys between the cabinets I try to summon the vision of cumulus clouds against a clear blue sky, the sounds of cow bells, of water gurgling along an irrigation furrow, the whine of myriad insects and the brilliant metallic colours of small birds. Light, voices, laughter.

The necklaces have become objects of research and display. But when I take them out of the cabinet and hold them in my hands, I sense they long to be out in real life.

Nevertheless museum pieces they are, and all I can do is to try to tell their stories, what they are, and the lives they used to live.

The soin:
Gathering nature’s plenty

One day in the Kerio Valley I was sitting together with a group of men in their thirties, in the shade of an expansive tamarind tree beside a canal. We talked about how the water was distributed, led out in ever smaller trenches to irrigate the fields. There was some talk about the mechanics of it, but above all they discussed the many turns and considerations surrounding how the water is allotted. There were many details, repetitions, revisions, complications. I was taking notes. An older man passed by on the trail alongside us, and one of my group called out: “Hey, Uncle. Where’s the fat?”

An odd question, one might think. But the chain of association is this: fat = plenty; plenty = party. The man was on his way to a party. Dressed in a threadbare overcoat, a film noir-style hat, shorts, and sandals made of the treads of recycled tires, he held a slender staff in one hand; in the other, a soin. It was the soin that revealed where he was headed.
When a man reaches a certain age, when he has a well-established household and is eligible to be considered an ‘elder’, he carves himself a soin. It is often of wood, but may also be made out of woven grass, caulked with cow dung. You start by chopping out a suitable chunk of mokoiywo wood, and then carefully form it into a serviceable goblet using a razor-sharp machete. The inside is hollowed out with the help of a curved knife. This particular soin is decorated with bits of aluminium fitted into the wood. Repairs and reinforcements are of aluminium, too. The lug is a metal spiral. The aluminium was formerly a saucepan. If a utensil is cracked or has a hole in it so that it is no longer useful, it is melted down and put to a new use.

A soin is used by men, but only on special occasions. Each man has his own soin and takes it with him to gatherings or ceremonies. It is in the first place used for drinking mead. When I took a soin out of the museum stores to be photographed, I put my nose to it and savoured the lingering aroma: sweet, floral and smoky. Some of the exuberance of the crowds, the sounds and the heat from ceremonies in the Kerio Valley have managed to survive in the climate- and temperature-controlled archive cabinets.

The formal description says a soin is used to drink mead at ceremonial gatherings. But beer brewed using millet and maize, the staple beverage at parties, is also drunk out of the soin, as is water if its owner feels thirsty on the way to or from the festivities. A soin is a subtle label, indicating that its owner is worthy of respect. Using a soin prematurely, before one has come of the proper age and status, is to invite ridicule.

Women drink out of a half gourd or empty cans or mugs of tin or plastic. So do younger men. Mead is served by older men. At ceremonies, mead and beer are distributed among those who are present. The various clans receive their assigned gourdfuls, but it is the older men in each category who administer the mead; it is by their grace that the women and younger men get a taste of it.

A ceremony that is successful has sweetness, the sweetness of honey. In Marakwet it is said that bees collect honey from everything in the surrounding landscape: from flowers, drops of water on a leaf, even from animal carcasses. Out of all this comes honey, sweetness, everything good. All of nature is concentrated in the honey used to brew kipketin, mead. In Marakwet ceremonies the power of nature is transferred, via mead, to the people, to the culture. The transfer is literal. Mead is showered over the individuals or objects that are to be blessed. For example: when a woman is expecting her first child, a barbariso ceremony is held. It is time for any grudges or disagreements between her clan and that of her husband to be resolved. If they are not put to rest, the lingering discord will keep the baby from coming out, will hinder the birth. In the ceremony all manner of discontent is stirred away (kebarbar means to stir). At the end of the ceremony, each of the four elders who organised and hosted the ceremony utters a benediction for the couple, takes a mouthful of mead from his soin and showers kipketin over them.

Now, what have we said about the soin? That it is an emblem for well-established men. It marks distinctions between young and old, between men and women; it tells about how all the wealth of the natural surroundings is brought together to do good in people’s lives. A ceremony without mead is in Marakwet unthinkable, and mead is best drunk out of a soin. (For those who have the right to do so.)

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1. I have briefly described this goblet before, in Östberg (2005, pp 54-55).

2. This is an abbreviated version. The ceremony is intricate, and describing all the steps in it and what they symbolize would lead too far afield.
For the people of Marakwet, mead is also a link back to their own history. It embodies all that their environment offers them, all that they need for their existence, and it is a medium by which they convey blessings. Kipketin links the Marakwet people to their land and to previous generations. It symbolizes an eternal process of recreation – and it is sweet. *Anyiny*, a ritual creation of ‘sweetness’, the resolution of anything that might put expectations awry, is to transform something ‘bitter’ to *sere*, something blessed. The soin is one of the tools for this transformation.

For the visitor to a museum far from Marakwet the goblet offers a sort of darkroom experience, in which some characteristic features of Marakwet society and culture emerge. That idea would not be foreign to people in Marakwet. Losiabuk, who sold this soin to us in the village of Tot in the Kerio Valley, had bought it from someone in Chesongoch because he liked its looks. He was happy that it was going to be shown in a museum far away from his village and agreed that it would be a good ambassador for Marakwet. And soon he planned to carve a soin of his own.

![Goblet, soin, Marakwet. Height 16 cm.](image)
This is perhaps the most notorious artefact of the colonial era, a *kipande*.

Anyone who wished to leave their home district, for example, to find work on the European-owned farms or in a town, was required to have an official permit to do so. The metal capsule, attached to a thin chain, was worn around the neck. The contents were an ID paper with name, place of birth or residence, fingerprint and information about the person’s occupation and place of employment. Officials might at any time ask native Kenyans to show their ‘papers’. The official opened the capsule, while its owner stood, hands clasped behind his or her back. The official could see whether the individual had permission to be where he was. It was unlawful for the owner himself to open the capsule. That is what people say today, the people old enough to have experienced those days. And why should we doubt it? Shows of power are, as we know, often more bizarre than rational.

The metal capsule and chain were sold at local general stores. They cost as much as a good, warm blanket.

This kipande belonged to Kiptilak from Sibou village in northern Marakwet. He was born early in the 20th century. When he died, his son, Metoboyon, saved his passport in case the English required it to be returned. Metoboyon had a kipande of his own. The museum acquired Kiptilak’s passport from his grandson, Kirotich Kirop, who was born in the 1950s. By now times had changed; Kirotich Kirop has never had to wear a kipande.
Family heirlooms

For decades now, sisal baskets from Ukambani have been the very best souvenirs visitors to Kenya can buy. Beautiful, durable, fine craftsmanship.

On the road to Ukambani you will always see women walking, weaving baskets as they walk. In their homes they will spend spare moments weaving baskets, between their daily chores. Many women have a basket always in progress. ‘Kamba baskets’ are a good source of income for many, many households in the region. Of course, they are also put to use – seed is stored in them, textiles, all kinds of things.

The first step in making such a basket is to separate the fibres of the sisal leaf against the slightly dull blade of a machete that has been wedged in the fork of a tree, or the sisal leaf may be pounded on a stump. The woman then rolls the fibres into twine along her thigh.

But this is the time of the terrible drought of 1983/84, and two colleagues from the National Museums of Kenya – Andrew Kite arap Cheptum and Johnstone Kibor Kassagam – and I are visiting the area to purchase sisal baskets for our respective museums’ collections. To our surprise, we were also offered antique baskets made of the inner bark of the baobab tree. They are coloured using red ochre and soot. Baskets like these are hardly ever made these days. But many families still have old baskets, and they treat them with reverence. They are more delicate, more elegant than sisal baskets, but perhaps more important they are keepsakes, remembrances of the women who made them.

Now, when there was no longer any food, and when we had bought all the sisal baskets our museums needed, the women brought out some of these old family heirlooms and offered them for sale.

Preparing the fibres from the inner bark of the baobab tree is an intricate process. You start by cutting out a rectangular section of the bark on one side of the tree. (Then you have to wait to let the tree heal before you harvest the section again.) The elephants are competitors in this regard; the bark contains a mineral that they like to eat. Elephants can actually finish so much of a tree’s bark that it may be nearly girdled, which can kill the tree.

Once the bark has been ‘harvested’, the inner bark is stripped away from the outer bark and pounded in a mortar. Small wads of the pounded fibre are then chewed until they are soft enough to be twisted into twine. Preparing the raw material and weaving a basket took one month, provided other chores didn’t get in the way. We also saw whole sacks made out of baobab fibre. They were used to store grain.

The fields lay ready for sowing, but week after week had passed without a cloud in the sky. It was the third year running without enough rain. In the family next to the house where we lived, an old woman sat in the shade. She had stopped eating. Whatever little was left in their stores was for the young, those who would sow the new crop, if only the rains would come. This was the predicament the people of the village found themselves in when we were offered baskets made of the inner bark of the baobab tree.³

We chose carefully among the baskets put before us. We were looking for baskets that would represent a traditional handicraft from Kitui in our museums for future

³ I have written about this dilemma on a previous occasion, see Östberg (2005), pp 56-58.
generations, and we were anxious to make the right choices. But suddenly one of the women burst out, scolding us: “Now you have chosen three bags from this woman, and none from her neighbour. What sort of people are you? How can you deny her the opportunity to earn a few shillings to buy food for her children? Why do you come here only to treat us like this?”

We were naturally intent on acquiring the best for the museums and, by extension, the taxpayers who ultimately would be paying for the baskets. At the same time, that meant that we were denying people who were hungry a chance to buy food they so badly needed. Should we instead have made our choices so that as many people as possible would at least have been helped a little?

On this particular occasion there were about 15 women present and a good number of children. Most of the baskets were of such quality that they might well be exhibited in a museum. A handful were masterpieces. The money we had was not enough to buy all the baskets. If we chose only the most exquisite, a few families would be able to get through the crisis and have money to spare. If we bought a basket from each of the families, the level of quality in our collections would have suffered, but the women we were bargaining with would have been more satisfied.

The intermezzo cast a sudden shadow over our professional roles. But we assured one another that it was important for a traditional handicraft to be preserved in our museums. Furthermore, droughts are a recurrent phenomenon in Ukambani, and selling one’s valuable possessions is a tried and true means people use to get by.\(^4\) That sounds good enough, but the fact remains that our museums came by these heirlooms because people were starving. We hadn’t stolen the baskets, but we did take advantage of a desperate situation. The women offering the items for sale had no other choice.

What to do? We were museum people, not aid workers. Should we haggle over prices with people in need, or deny them the chance to solve their problems in the manner they had chosen?

We decided the best solution was this: We bought the best baskets for our museums, while we made sure that everyone sold at least one of the baskets they offered. A pragmatic solution, yet the fact remains that we were able to acquire cultural treasures only made available to us because of the famine. Few of the women we did business with would ever replace the old baskets made of baobab fibre. They would use the coarser but readily available sisal. We appeased our consciences with the thought that perhaps their grandchildren would one day value being able to see these well-preserved old baskets on display in the museum. A rationalisation born of the terrible drought in Ukambani.

Looking back, I am not at all sure that we even acted in the best interests of our institutions. Displaying the baskets with the text, “Baskets made of the inner bark of baobab. Kamba, Kitui, Kenya. Early to mid-twentieth century” and a little information about how they are made leaves visitors to the museum in the dark about the desperate famine of 1983-84, without which the baskets would never have been on display.

Might not a collection of baskets of a range of qualities be more informative? Wouldn’t it be interesting to know that the sellers had insisted that the museum purchase baskets from everyone, not just a few? Isn’t that important? Isn’t the story the items have to tell more important than how well they are made?

In the confines of the museum a baobab basket will never be used to store or carry things. The memory of the great-grandmother who made it is lost on the visitors to the museum. The basket has lost its purpose and meaning, its life. Removed as it is to an alien world, it needs to be given new tasks: it should afford visitors to the museum a sense, an inkling of the lay of the land, of the climate, of day-to-day life in Ukambani. It should say something about local skills and traditions. But, above all, it should give voice to its former owners. In this case, she says: “We are, and our children’s lives are, more important than your museum collections. Do something that makes life easier for your fellow human beings.” And she surely has other things to say that I don’t know, but that visitors may hear her say, provided they are told more than merely that what they are looking at is a basket from eastern Kenya.

When we were selecting the baskets, we focused on acquiring the finest examples. Instead, I think we should have heeded the woman who demanded that everyone be represented. Had we collected a cross-section of the baskets, sought to portray what is rather than show only the most exquisite examples, would we not have made it easier for museum visitors to grasp what life is like in Ukambani?

The many virtues of a half gourd

What is the most common item in settlements in the Kenyan countryside? Making generalisations about a whole country is of course risky business, but still, I would put my money on the half gourd. Wherever you go, you’re sure to find them. Leaning against a wall, turned upside down to dry after washing the dishes, or set aside in a quiet corner with tomatoes or something else in them. They are used as bowls at meals; they are used to store flour and to transport grain. A six-year-old may feed their younger sister or brother porridge out of a half gourd. People drink water out of them, or milk, or millet beer.

Before sowing, seed is cleaned and sorted in half gourds. After the harvest, grain is separated from the chaff with the help of two half gourds. Potters keep clay in them.

There are less mundane uses, too. Seers keep birds’ bones in a half gourd – or pebbles or cowry shells or whatever else enables them to gaze into the unknown. Healers do the same with the substances they use. And where would one store the chalk powder that figures in so many ceremonies, if not in a half gourd? Another gourd will be used to collect the blood of a ritually sacrificed animal. Food and drink for ancestor spirits are set out in them.

Frequently, decorative patterns are burned into the gourd shell – dashes that look like the tracks of a bird or waves or triangles that represent the three cooking stones, the symbol for woman. The skin of a gourd is easily scored. It invites decorative carving. In 1910/11, Swedish ethnographer Gerhard Lindblom documented bas relief designs on half gourds in Ukambani, in eastern Kenya: Mount Kilimanjaro, crocodile, zebra, arrowhead, rhinoceros, snake, frog, stool, coin. What did the figures symbolise? Lindblom writes that people decorated the gourds for aesthetic reasons, for “the pleasure of the work for its own sake. Possibly some medicine man puts magic signs on his apparatus. But on the whole it is all pure ornament”.

In the 1970s, artist Peter Nzuki, born and raised in Ukambani, happened to read Lindblom’s monograph and was fascinated. He started carving gourds, which he sold to a couple of galleries in Nairobi and the National Museum shop. When his nephew Patrick Ngui finished school, he moved in with his uncle and started working in the atelier, carving gourds and making drawings, which he sold to a souvenir shop on Mokhtar Dada Street in Nairobi. When his father died, Patrick Ngui moved home to his village, Thaka, in Ukambani, to run the family farm and to marry. He continues to carve gourds for extra income.

Patrick Ngui produces two to three gourds a day in the periods when he has free time. He works with his knife directly, without preliminary sketches. He generally starts by dividing the gourd into two sections, and then fills the one field with animals, for example, and the other with something else.

He likes to depict scenes of country life: the honeyguide that leads the hunter to bee hives, or herds of cattle, village dances. Patrick Ngui, too, has seen the pictures of the old gourds in Lindblom’s monograph. “Those images are hard to do, but they are very beautiful.” He enjoys carving gourds and keeps several favourites in his home as decoration. But in contrast to those who carved the gourds seen by Lindblom in Ukambani more than a century ago, he emphasizes meanings in his patterns and images. Is this perhaps an adaptation to the market? Tourists hunger after glimpses of local folklore, and Patrick Ngui’s images are

5 Lindblom (1919/20), p 370.
popular. We survey the motifs he is working on at the moment: “The elephant means good luck. If you meet an elephant at the start of the hunt, the hunt will be successful. If you meet him on a journey, you will find what you are looking for. The zebra is beautiful and does no one harm. She is like a woman, they have the same character. We do not eat zebras – they are like donkeys, so you cannot eat them. But the rhinoceros is dangerous, his heart is like ours. His anger is aroused in an instant, then he calms down and lopes off into the forest and has soon forgotten what it was that bothered him. When we humans calm down, we instead ask forgiveness. The ostrich and the snake embrace. The ostrich brings food to the snake; the snake protects the ostrich’s nest. That’s why they are friends. Or maybe it is only because the shells of ostrich eggs are so thick that the snake can’t get into them.”

Clearly, the stories are enticing and his gourds do sell.
REFERENCES


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Dr Wilhelm Östberg is Associate Professor in Social Anthropology, formerly curator of African studies at the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm, and currently affiliated researcher at the Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University. Together with colleagues in the National Museums of Kenya he has participated in a number of field collections in different parts of Kenya. His recollections of working in the Kerio Valley appeared as “Life among the Marakwet” in issue 42 of Kenya Past and Present.

… AND THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Tony Sandin is a noted Swedish photographer, who is particularly recognised for his photographic field work among Native American tribes in South Dakota, USA. He has had several solo exhibitions and frequently participates in group exhibitions. He is currently affiliated with the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm.