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PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION
(FOR PRESERVATION) OF CULTURAL HERITAGE:
INSIGHTS ON COASTAL KENYA *

1. EMERGENCE OF A CONTEXT

Like most African states, Kenya is a colonial invention—an arbitrary segmentation of a territory inhabited by a variety of indigenous peoples with differing cultural and linguistic traditions. The colonizers intervened in a complex ethnic and economic mosaic, transforming scattered presences into a stratified structure convenient to the exercise of power. The country’s varied population is inhabited by 44 different communities, not including legacy Indian and Chinese diasporas that, like the British, exert a lingering cultural influence nationwide. Inter-ethnic relations are common. Many Kenyans have ethnically mixed families and the average citizen speaks at least three languages. Later changed to ‘ethnic group’, the term ‘tribal’ that appeared in Kenya’s first constitution is making a comeback in everyday speech, indicating among the local population the assertion of distinctive identities.

Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first president and hailing from its most populous tribe, the Kikuyu, sought at the country’s founding in 1964 to create a national identity among the ethnic groups within borders set at the 1885 Berlin Conference, during the so-called Scramble for Africa among colonial European powers. Summarized by the term *Harambee*, meaning ‘everyone pushes together’ in Kiswahili, the Republic of Kenya has yet to achieve the “unity in diversity” that the nation’s Education Ministry takes as its stated

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aim. Instead, Kenyatta's Kikuyu tribe dominates in a government whose representatives use ethnicity as an instrument for creating socio-political affiliations and exploiting inherent divides. This absence of a shared narrative persists both at the level of historical reconstruction and at that of the transmission of memory. With the urging by political elites that citizens forget the past in order to reconcile and unify the nation inducing only amnesia.¹

Kenya ranks among Africa's most populous countries and largest economies. Renowned for its spectacular natural beauty, it is home to seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites and many other amazing assets. Along with important museums, monuments and landmarks, these include a wealth of intangible heritage that merits protection and promotion. The foundation of the Kenya National Cultural Council in 1972 made cultural heritage preservation a strategic pursuit.² Adoption in 2010 of a new constitutional charter provided the policy impetus for cultural heritage promotion, a rapidly expanding sector in African economies.

Coastal Kenya's variety of forms of cultural heritage reflect both the complex history of populations inhabiting the region and the unique traditions arising from their adaptation to its environmental conditions. The influence of religious beliefs in architectural design, the ritual practices influencing lifestyles, and the diversity of customs in dispute resolution all mirror this richness. Traditions and progress co-exist in these places at differing paces, recounting historical memories and political eras.

Whilst European knowledge of African heritage is mostly based on the experiences and canon of Western geographers, historians, and anthropologists, the same is not the case with Kenyans. Under the economic and cultural dominion of colonizing Europeans, only in the post-colonial era have they begun approaching their cultural heritage according to their own perspectives.³ Absent exposure to European paradigms, the appreciation of places and assets among indigenous peoples diverges from the European view. Nevertheless, observing the attitudes of foreigners may contribute to trans-

¹ Lotte HUGHES, "The Production and Transmission of National History: Some Problems and Challenges," in *Managing Heritage, Making Peace: History, Identity and Memory in Contemporary Kenya*, by Annie E. Coombes, Lotte Hughes, Karega-Munene (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 185–86. Cornel WEST, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

² Patricia A. OPONDO, "Cultural Policies in Kenya," *Arts Education Policy Review* 5 (2000): 18–24.

³ Gerald WANJOHI, *Philosophy and Liberation of Africa* (Nairobi: Nyaturima Publications, 2017).

formation and rediscovery of cultural landscapes wrapped in the mist of the obvious. This foreign gaze leads indigenous peoples to express curiosity and admiration toward this rediscovered reality.

Cultural heritage belongs to those who perceive it as such. However, there are different levels of heritage in a globalizing world to which values of belonging and identity—be it local, regional, national, or international—may be attributed. And to which prestigious certification in some cases is granted. The interest in immaterial heritage stimulates recognition of intangible assets that enrich narratives and promote socio-educational processes. Since each asset is essential to nourish local understanding, the vision and direction of the communities from which these assets emanate should guide targeted strategies aimed at enhancing their multiplicity and uniqueness. Indeed, it has been observed that all forms of heritage might be redefined as intangible since the culture to be preserved exists in the values and meanings embedded in places and practices.⁴

European policy recommendations for the preservation of tangible and intangible heritages work backward from today's needs to acknowledgment of the past, thus consolidating national identities. According to UNESCO, intangible heritage that corresponds to living traditions and expressions inherited and transferred to descendants, is the built-in memory that finds itself inscribed on monuments, in texts, and other forms of representation that materialize it. The category of national assets that comprise a "living archive" is crucial to strategies that aim to preserve the immaterial as a form of memory and embedded knowledge. However, this living archive should not become a concept that gives more importance to the inherited content, considered "stable heritage", than to those who safekeep it in innovative fashions.

In the post-colonial era, Kenya has participated along with other African states (Tanzania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal) in reconstituting choreutic folklore from rural communities as symbols of an authentic, pre-colonial past. Supported by the state, traditional dance and music companies performing at home and abroad provide cultural legitimacy. Imbued with tradition and authenticity, performances of regional music and dance have proven an effective and useful tool for shaping collective identities and nationalist ideologies. In this context, artistic practices are associated both with political pluralism and a strong ethical grounding. Conceived initially as an opportunity to showcase traditional music and dance, this form of entertain-

⁴ Laurajane SMITH, *Uses of Heritage* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2006), 11.

ment has evolved into choreographed productions used to substantiate cultural identities, including through the dramatization of the lives of national heroes and heroines.

Governments wishing to appear forward-looking realize the importance of cultural heritage in promoting and differentiating their country's image on a global scale. In Kenya, as in much of the African continent, indigenous lore, entertainment forms, and craftsmanship are seen as vehicles both for generating economic growth and for educating communities. Artistic productions that activate social awareness are commonplace. Such productions strengthen public debate on gender, geopolitical and human rights issues, conveying calls to action in areas that range from public service to health and welfare. Kenyan artists are leveraging decolonization in explorations of new paradigms of interaction, including with indigenous peoples that maintain and employ ancestral traditions in daily life. Such mindful approaches to cultural heritage empower local communities in ways that are evident in the Contemporary Art they produce.

Cultural heritage references beauty in a broad and multifold sense as a specific trait of the anthropological and natural environment, thus making appreciation of cultural assets, be they paintings, a sacred forest, or an ethnic dance, an essential act of citizenship. Beauty offers the opportunity to understand everyday life as a historical product—a dynamic form of social existence.

The call for beauty is an objective of present time, expressing the need of the person and society to achieve harmony and balance. Beauty provides a way of thinking about human dignity and difference afresh.⁵ As such, it is relevant to focus on approaches that frame cultural heritage in the aesthetics of places and people, through behavior, language, and relationships.

2. THE WITNESS'S GAZE

The analysis presented in this text is the product of field research carried out during frequent and extended stays in the Kenyan county of Kilifi that began in 2017 and provided opportunities to engage with large natural and cultural heritage assets, including archaeological sites, wildlife, landscapes, and folklore. Being dissociated from one's original place solicits a fertile

⁵ James HILLMAN, *City and Soul: Uniform Edition*, vol. 2 (New York: Spring Publications, 2006).

adventure of knowledge-gathering and imagination. As a traveler/researcher, one realizes how involvement and awe occur in connection with nature, artistic creation, archeological sites, celebrations, and ceremonies. Dwelling periodically in an alien social scene permits expansion beyond the usual, Western perspectives aimed at separating body from mind; emotions from rationality; memory from intuition. Standing in the Kenyan space means relying also on new stylizations, such as ways of walking, eating, hand expressions, and talking.

Thus, it follows that relations with forms of cultural heritage cannot be limited to pre-directed touristic gazes that disclose realities already interpreted, since experiencing the alien space through multi-sensory richness—the physical, the emotional, the rational—is an encounter always in progress, embedded in one’s own feeling. As the anthropologist David Le Breton notes, the world is indeed given in the form of the sensible: “There is nothing in the mind that has not passed through the senses.”⁶ This observation offers grounding to abandon intellectual and distant reality and encourages a more authentic intertwining with the world. From a perspective that allows feeling to activate knowledge, the research conducted in Kenya was undertaken by exploring a variety of artistic, performative, and ritual languages in search for representation and recognition of authenticity within indigenous communities, absent biases and misinterpretation.

Such an entry point in the interpretative dialogue gives cultural assets a wider temporal scope by incorporating the aesthetic and hermeneutic of the witness. The collective memory that any heritage production systematically recalls encounters and collides with individual memory. The user makes the enhancement process possible: consisting above all in the recognition and actualization of the meaning shared at the moment of use. Cultural heritage possesses exceptional value for the culture that produced it and, as such, for the whole of humanity, since it elaborates a response to issues universally shared. What makes universal each heritage expression is not general appreciation, but its archetypal link with other narratives.

From a psychological viewpoint, each encounter with the products of another culture is, like all encounters, part of individual and collective growth. We like to think that to the optimal end, inter-cultural encounters may serve what psychoanalyst Carl Jung called the transcendent function: through the use of the other’s symbols, one can more fully become oneself. To be fully

⁶ David LE BRETON, *Antropologia del corpo e modernità* (Milan: Giuffrè, 2007), 4.

oneself means to be fully situated in the context of humanity as a whole; any attempt for separation from the whole is an act against fullness of identity.⁷

Reflecting on the perception of cultural heritage, it seems appropriate also to recall John Dewey's thoughts on works of art as expressed in *Art as Experience* (1934).⁸ According to the pragmatist philosopher, appreciation of an artwork is not a theoretical act, but a practical one. The work of art is not simply an object. Its ability to create a relationship with the viewer becomes his or her experience. Taking the production and perception of an artwork as an experiential whole, Dewey underlines the distinction between the artistic and the aesthetic in the processes of making and receiving it. The artist at work embodies the attitude of the perceiver, so the aesthetic experience is closely linked to that of creating. The process of artistic production is organically connected to aesthetic perception. The artist continues to shape until satisfied with the desired perception of such a process. At each stage, there is anticipation of what is about to occur: the construction ends only when the product is experienced as good, and this experience comes through direct perception. Similarly for the observer, contemplation is not passive receptivity. It is a process consisting of a series of reagent acts that accumulate in the direction of objective contentment. Perceiving the object fills the viewer with emotion and in this way he or she feels to create their own experience according to their point of view and interest. Otherwise, there is not perception but recognition. In recognition there is the application of some preformed scheme, while perception is a reconstructive act.

On the part of the perceiver, as of the artist, there is an action. The work of art involves the viewer because it generates a feeling. However, there is no true act of expression if they do not believe what they are sensing. The work of art is not a neutral object, but one that creates a belief. The approach to the work of art then must be not only theoretical but also practical—or, experiential. The user is no longer an outside observer—exercising judgement through attraction to an artwork makes of them an actor in the work itself.

⁷ Carl Gustav JUNG, *The Undiscovered Self* (London: Routledge, 2002). Interesting to note are the implications for intercultural awareness based on the recognition that there is only one Earth and one humankind, and no geopolitical distinction in East and West, nor North and South that can rend humanity into different halves. According to Jung, psychic reality exists in its original oneness and human development moves toward a level of consciousness where one no longer believes in partition but recognises this unity.

⁸ John DEWEY, *Art as Experience* (New York: Putnam, 1934) (Italian translation: *L'arte come esperienza* [Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1951]); Tom HENNES, "Rethinking the Visitor Experience: Transforming Obstacle into Purpose," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 42, vol. 2 (2002), 109–21.

3. PATTERNS OF INTERSUBJECTIVE RECOGNITION

The distance between individuals and exotic heritage assets is bridged by critical exercises (observation, analysis, comparison, internalization, detachment, identification) that experiences the products of cultural in a continuous and sinuous movement. One that integrates historical dynamics that accrue in the social fabric and modifications of natural environments.

Thus, understanding Kenyan cultural heritage requires recognition of the economic frameworks that exist in its coastal region. Along with the sign hermeneutics of ethno-anthropology that refer to the different industries, the many signs of biodiversity possess a communicative function; in agricultural production landscapes—sisal, rice, tea, coffee; in functional linear systems—canalization; in soil management techniques. Likewise, for the specific connotations of cultural identity that include systems of customary and ritual signs, such as those conveyed through local food traditions, medical-spiritual practices, religious and propitiatory functions. The semantic spectrum of cultural heritage further increases when taking into account multiple meanings derived from the mixing of cultures among the geography's Arab-Muslim, Masai and Mijikenda populations, each with their own models and paces of development. Further levels of signification can be found in storytelling. And by experiencing widespread family hospitality. Accessibility to cultural heritage must reach out for spaces and times that cross multiple layers of social fabric.⁹

Understanding a cultural asset as a work-activity, as a stratified product of human ingenuity, requires corresponding creative and propulsive action by the user. Every cultural asset indeed is a cultural subject that asks for relations and dialogue with other subjects capable of recognizing it as such; to acknowledge themselves in it as well as to produce, in the interaction and by virtue of the same interaction, new cultural experiences.

In the Kenyan coastal context, the space occupied by cultural heritage is the expression of a specific worldview that encompasses and directs human actions. It contains theoretical-practical forms of primordial knowledge revealing an original semantic depth. As in any civilization, the refined and objectifying symbolic forms produced by art, religion, and architecture are grounded in a holistic creative force. There exists a pre-categorical, vital current recognized as the original unity from which mankind develops its relationship with the world, and where individuals seek personal meaning.

⁹ Eugenio TURRI, *Il paesaggio e il silenzio* (Venice: Marsilio, 2004).

The concept of ambiance occupies the space between subject and object and reflects the sheer diversity of the senses (light, sound, heat, smell, air flows, kinesthetics, touch).¹⁰ Its focus is the awareness of material atmospheres, perceptive configurations, physical phenomena, and the “affective tonality” within places and everyday practices of city dwellers. It is based on the belief that various sensory tonalities affect perception of cultural ambiances in which users of a given space are immersed. Architectural, urban and intangible aesthetics that can be grasped in human sensory dimensions such as sonic, tactile, kinesthetic or olfactive. Perception is understood as the outcome of the brain processing information from the senses. Hence, perception is multi-sensory. And the notion of a recovery of the profound unity of being finds a link with the contemporary theory of ambiance in the internal dynamics at work in the processes underlying creativity.

Therefore, in the configuration of a more profound phenomenology of the perception of heritage, it is necessary to include both visible and non-visible components, paying particular attention to the role of ethical values and belief. Within Kenyan coastal habitats, cultural production is often linked to religious practice, establishing a connection with a sphere of reality which is believed prior to being experienced. Such strength of belief springs from diverse religious and animistic worships and is ingrained in Kenyan communities.

Understanding cultural heritage implies taking into account proximity and distance, persistence and change, reality and mental representations. Its meaning is revealed only with a long, hermeneutical journey through the linguistic mediations of signs and symbols, of stories and ideologies, of metaphors and myths that constitute and determine it.

4. TOWARDS A POIETIC APPROACH

Without the memory of our origins, the past plunges into oblivion. Without continuity, we condemn the next generation to oblivion. Therefore, the task is to promote a conscious competence in addressing cultural heritage, to

¹⁰ Gernot BÖHME, “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics,” *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 113–26; Daniel SIRET, “Understanding Past Sensibility to Grasp Present Architecture: The Example of Solar Radiation,” in *Envisioning Architecture. Image, Perception and Communication of Heritage*, ed. Anetta Kepczynska-Walczak (Łódź: Lodz University of Technology, 2015), 125–31; Jean-Paul THIBAUD, “The Sensory Fabric of Urban Ambiances,” *Senses & Society* 6, no. 2 (2011): 203–15.

grasp its extraordinary semantic density, to enjoy the beauty it expresses, to rediscover our historical and spiritual roots through it. Activating suitable dynamics makes each subject-user a potential designer of future heritage and a resource in the development of creative solutions. In this sense, a full, authentic use of cultural heritage demands planning skills for direct and constructive participation in the revaluation of human habitats.

A recent heritage research approach, Hardcore Heritage, proposes to investigate how spatial experiences are able to trigger subjective imagination.¹¹ By considering environment a component of cultural heritage and taking in account that people engage with it based on what it affords them, Hardcore Heritage interprets history as the future in revitalization of cultural assets. Interfacing cultural heritage with social action and matching skills with needs offers a pro-active path to more dynamic heritage preservation. Challenging imagination in contemporary transitions of heritage assets means placing stress on the knowledge and skills that are essential for discovery of the connections that create dialogue among actors and promote cooperative and collaborative social practices.

True novelty lies not only in elaborating innovative strategies in cultural and artistic management, but in the orientation of social awareness to abandon postmodern hedonism. A mindful encounter with creativity may encourage a way of living off-the-grid as means of escape from consumer society's deceptions and flattery. And to re-establish a more harmonious and less abusive relationship with the world of culture and nature. The system of cultural heritage is a living organism, whose spatial and social dimensions interpenetrate. The ability to get out of the ethnocentrism that separates and discriminates in order to discover differences and similarities, to multiply the views of the world, demands new forms of thought, and new forms of sociality that also are guaranteed by a trans-cultural citizenship. As such, it requires the sort of protection that results from participation of and in entire communities.

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¹¹ Erik RIETVELD and Ronald RIETVELD, "Hardcore Heritage: Imagination for Preservation," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017).

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PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION (FOR PRESERVATION)
OF CULTURAL HERITAGE: INSIGHTS ON COASTAL KENYA

Summary

Contemporary social awareness of cultural heritage mostly expresses the understanding of intangible heritage according to rationalist theories of perception. These theories bind modes of recognition to empirical and sensory domains. Yet in order to value and safeguard cultural heritage, be it in the form of ritual practices, symbolic narratives, creation myths or religious and mystical experiences, it is necessary to interpret and appreciate the being and doing of diverse cultural groups. A meaningful analysis of intangible dimensions in cultural heritage needs to consider the role and ontological status of human emotion and imagination.

Individuals are actors in a given space and interact with it as much as they can, depending on the frequency of their visits. Repeated research stays in the Kenyan coastal region offered the author opportunities for communication with a specific natural and cultural environment. This paper explores a participatory process of enhancement and interpretation of intangible cultural heritage that includes feelings and emotions in analysis of the body of knowledge that results from this research approach.

Keywords: cultural heritage perception; coastal Kenya; social awareness; creativity

FENOMENOLOGIA POSTRZEGANIA
(DLA ZACHOWANIA) DZIEDZICTWA KULTUROWEGO.
SPOSTRZEŻENIA NA TEMAT WYBRZEŻA KENII

Streszczenie

Współczesna społeczna świadomość dziedzictwa kulturowego wyraża się przede wszystkim w rozumieniu dziedzictwa niematerialnego zgodnie ze współczesnymi teoriami percepcji. Teorie te wiążą tryb krytyczno-poznawczy z domeną sensoryczną. Jednak, aby docenić i chronić dziedzictwo kulturowe występujące, czy to w formie praktyk rytualnych, narracji symbolicznych, mitów o stworzeniu, czy też doświadczeń religijnych i mistycznych, konieczna jest interpretacja i poszanowanie istnienia i działania różnych grup kulturowych. Zatem, rzetelna analiza niematerialnych wymiarów dziedzictwa kulturowego musi uwzględniać rolę i status ontologiczny ludzkich emocji i wyobraźni, zaangażowanych w procesy percepcyjne, poznawcze i interpretacyjne.

Jednostki są aktorami w danej przestrzeni i wchodzą z nią w interakcje zależnie od tego, jak często mają z nią kontakt. Wielokrotne pobyty badawcze na wybrzeżu kenijskim dały autorce możliwość wejścia w proces komunikacji z określonym środowiskiem naturalnym i kulturowym. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia partycypacyjny proces wzbogacania i interpretacji niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego, który obejmuje uczucia i emocje w analizie wiedzy wynikającej z tego podejścia badawczego.

Słowa kluczowe: postrzeganie dziedzictwa kulturowego; wybrzeże Kenii; świadomość społeczna; kreatywność