

# Towards preserving Kenya's heritage

By WAHOME MUTAHI

IF there is a piece of advice that is given with constant regularity, it is that Kenyans should preserve their culture and guard against harmful foreign influences.

The old nationalists sang the song of African cultural integrity in the days of the national struggle for independence and found a ready audience.

Today, in the face of the image of "vanishing Africa" the advice against selling our souls in the name of modernity is still being given religiously.

But, some have asked, have we taken any concrete steps to try to document what Kenyan national cultures entail so as to give

meaning to the statements on culture? Evidence that efforts towards this end are being made was given when this writer talked to Sultan Somjee, a material culture researcher at Nairobi University's Institute of African Studies.

Somjee has been involved in the collection of Kenyan material culture since 1976 and has collected over 3,000 items. The items, littering the floor of the institute's material culture store, perhaps represents one of the best efforts to study Kenya's culture.

If nothing else, the collection is important in that it is not a mere treasure of a collector's items but

a genuine attempt to appraise the cultural wealth of Kenya.

Out of his field work experience, Somjee is alarmed by the rate at which Kenyan material culture is being exported. "No country in the world," he said, "allows the export of its material culture and while the rest of the Third World countries are fighting to repatriate material culture which was taken during colonialism, we are still exporting ours."

He lamented that while Kenya does not have a complete museum of cultural material, the University of Edinburgh has the largest collection of Pokot

material in the world.

The problem is compounded by a story in *The Guardian* in August 1978. The paper reported that the then director of Archives, Dr. Maina Kagombe, was leading a team from the Kenya National Archives to try to repatriate a number of specific cultural items and "tons of documents now in British libraries and archives taken out of Kenya before independence in 1963, and considered by Kenyans to be part of their national heritage".

When I suggested to Somjee that his material culture collection smacked of the obsession to collect "exotic" artefacts and that he was making Kenya people mere curiosities, he was quick to point out that there is a wide difference between romanticising a people and trying to appreciate their lives.

Wahome next pg



**LEFT: Somjee and Hezron Omondi dusting part of their vast collection at Nairobi University. Some of the items in the picture include industrial implements from Kerio Valley, Bajun pottery, Turkana footwear and ornaments, Marakwet surgical tools, Iduvi horns from the Coast, and Kikuyu folding chairs.**

He said "material culture is a collective term for products made and used by people. The product design classifications of these objects are tools, shelters, con-

tainers, furniture, body covers and ornaments".

For Somjee, these objects are not romantic but reflect man's attempts to control nature and

help him to struggle with other human beings hostile to him.

As an example, he cited the high-fenced Luo homestead, *Pacho*, which he said reflects the

people's struggle against tropical climate and wild animals.

He also gave the example of shoe designs of most rural communities engaged in farming or pastoralism.

These people, he demonstrated, cannot wear high-heeled shoes because their labour activities dictate that they have a stable centre of gravity while working, a state that can only be achieved by the use of flat footwear.

As opposed to the kinds of studies that emphasise antiques, Somjee's research takes culture to be something of the present.

Although his collection may give the image that he is concerned with the so-called "backward" people of Kenya — Pokot, Marakwet, Turkana etc. — he maintains that he is working on the existing material culture rather than something of

the past.

"We think the culture of the nomads is primitive and that their lives are a museum in the present and that they are in the past," he said.

Against the view that African culture is a fossilised institution which should be exhumed and neatly packed in a museum to be viewed at leisure, Somjee believes that no culture is static.

"People in a particular community renovate and readopt their culture whenever there is an environmental and social oppression," he said.

He gave the example of the Mau Mau fighters who adopted Christian hymns and changed their words to become songs of patriotism.

Right now, Somjee is involved in a project jointly organised by the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development and the Institute of African Studies.

The objective of the project is to gather information on Kenyan material culture and use it to educate Government extension officers in the rural areas on the live of the people they are working among.

The effort is to change the attitudes of these officers on the cultural traditions of Kenyan people.

During phase one of the project which is nearing completion now, Somjee and his team have studied Pokot, Marakwet, Akamba and Turkana material culture.

**A QUICKLY-GROWING number of Africans from former French colonies are beginning to re-examine the**

"Gate to Paris" is one of the many Black African villages estimated at one-time to house over 164,000 labourers. They are operated by a French company ironically known as Assotraf (Association of African