

"For as-yet-unknown uses" (1): Potential Histories and Futures of the Man-Eaters of Tsavo

Sam Hopkins and Marian Nur Goni

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Typically, the story is told like this:

In 1898, when the British were building the Uganda Railway to connect the port of Mombasa with Lake Victoria—a major imperial infrastructure between present-day Kenya and Uganda—they encountered two man-eating lions in a territory known as Tsavo. These lions terrorised the African labourers and the Indian indentured workers building the railway, killing dozens of individuals and bringing the construction to halt (2). The engineer responsible for building the bridge over the Tsavo river, Colonel John Henry Patterson, eventually killed the lions in late 1898. Their death was announced in the House of Lords in London and the lions were immortalised in Patterson's book *The Man-eaters of Tsavo and other East-African adventures* (1907), praised by US President Roosevelt as “the most remarkable account of which we have any record.”(3)

In 1924, the Field Museum of Chicago bought the lion skins (and their skulls), which Patterson had been using in his home as rugs, for 5000 dollars.(4) Julius Friesser, a taxidermist working at the museum, then transformed these rugs into taxidermied specimens. They were placed in a diorama, where they still reside today.

The above is one version of the events, and it has been repeatedly reproduced in popular culture for more than a century. Stemming from *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo's* master narrative, it aggregates a “family of films,” directly or more-loosely connected to it, which position/envision Africa as “this place where you collect memories” as one character of *The Killers of Kilimanjaro* (1959) aptly puts it: i.e. a playground for manly experiences testing out Western masculinities.

The first Hollywood adaptation of the story, *Bwana Devil*, an adventure B-movie—which happens to have entered cinema history for being the first 3D film in color with sound—was released in 1952.

Interestingly this is the same year in which a major, political uprising, widely known as Mau Mau, began in Kenya.(5) The colonial regime declared a State of Emergency which was to last for 8 years leading eventually to Kenya's independence in 1963. These social and political movements are illegible in the films which depict (colonial) business as usual.



Simba Mbili_01_Field Museum Display_Courtesy J. Weinstein_(c)Field Museum

Our attention has been captured by these seemingly coincidental disjunctions. Indeed, in the course of our research, we have come across a number of other narratives invisibilized by the dominant version. Often, these discrepancies have opened entirely new spaces of inquiry and questions in which the white male hunter is no longer centerstage battling to dominate the African "wild" nature. A number of other actors—including non human actors such as the lions themselves(6)—emerge which involve altogether a different set of gestures and vocabularies: these speak of claims, of rights, of working conditions, of resistance.(7) We have been intrigued by the amount of energies, investments, emotions, gestures, languages that these two lions continue to trigger in very different (geopolitical) spaces more than a century after

their demise. Furthermore, we have realized that we too have been moved by them in a variety of ways and have now come to see ourselves as agents involved in their manifold, transnational trajectories, and the questions they raise, which we try to intertwine.

Between 2018 and 2022, we have been involved in an project entitled the International Inventories Programme, which brought together researchers, museum professionals and two artists' collectives, The Nest and SHIFT, between Kenya and Germany, with the aim of building a database of Kenyan objects held outside of Kenya. The project is part of a global, decolonial discussion about restitution and the ownership of cultural heritage in the aftermath of imperialism. Over the three years of the project, we built up an (ongoing) database of over 32,000 objects from the inventories of thirty museums in seven countries.(8) It is then in this frame-restitution-that we first came across both Kenyan and British articles about diplomatic gestures, or talks, that took place in the mid-2000s to try and repatriate the two lions to Kenya.

In the Railway Museum in Nairobi, we found a faded photocopy of a newspaper article from 2007 titled "Give us back our man-eaters". (9) This is a museum that, arguably, would be in a good position to tell this story or even to possibly house the lions themselves. We are interested in trying to understand what both the presence (in the US) and the absence (in Kenya) of these lions produces. Seen from this perspective, a number of politicians, scientists, activists, regular groups of citizens both in the US and Kenya enter the scene.(10) Some of them link the animal decimation in the 19th century to the current loss of biodiversity, or to current human-"wildlife" conflicts, attesting to "how objects collect people, that is how museum objects to some degree conceal the mass of relations that lie behind them (...)"(11)

HERITAGE

Give us back our man-eaters

Famous Tsavo beasts, a crowd puller in an American museum, could be returned

By STEPHEN MBURU

Many Kenyans remember the infamous man-eating lions of Tsavo from the accounts in history books. But few know that their trophies are a key attraction at the Field Museum in Chicago, US.

More than 100 years after they were killed by a former American soldier, the man-eaters of Tsavo - now stuffed lions at the museum - have drawn the attention of government agencies, particularly the National Museums of Kenya, with calls for their repatriation.

But as the NMK pursues diplomatic channels to bring back the trophies, its corporate affairs director, Ms Connie Maina, says the immediate plan is to have the US exhibit the lions as Kenya's heritage at the Field Museum.

"Though the Chicago Field Museum respects our heritage legally, we will use international protocols to have them back. We are working with Chicago (authorities) so we can have an exhibition of our heritage there early next year," Ms Maina told the *Sunday Nation*.

If the trophies are returned, they will be a major tourist attraction as they have been in the US.

There have been media reports that Kenya is pushing to have the stuffed lions



American author Phil Caputo beside the display of the man-eating lions of Tsavo at the Field Museum in Chicago. Inset, Lt-Col John Patterson who killed the lions. Photos/CHICAGO SUN-TIMES and CORRESPONDENT

back but Ms Maina and Kenya's ambassador to the US, Mr Peter Ogego, have clarified that there has not been any formal request to the Field Museum to have them released to Kenya.

The man-eaters' recreations are smaller than their original size because the acclaimed tiger hunter, Lt-Col John Patterson - who shot them dead in December 1898 - reportedly cut up their hides to make the rugs which he used for 26 years before he sold them to the museum.

Lt-Col Patterson, who later documented his adventures in the popular book, *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo*, said the lions were unusually large, each measuring over nine

feet long from nose to the tip of tail. It took eight men to carry them back to the camp after he shot them dead.

Lt-Col Patterson skinned them, conserved their skulls and used their hides as his treasured rugs. The soldier sold them to the Field Museum for \$5,000 (Sh330,000) in 1924. He died in 1947.

Before they met their death, the two maneless lions would raid the tents of the railway construction workers, drag their victims out, and feast on them.

They persisted for nearly a year, feasting on human flesh at Tsavo until Patterson, an engineer in charge of the construction of the bridge across Tsavo River, killed them.

They had devoured about 140 people, including 28 construction workers.

He killed one on the night of December 9, and the second on the morning of December 29, 1898.

Patterson's story has since been told and re-told and even formed scripts for three films - *The Devine Devil* (1953), *Killers of Kilimanjaro* (1959) and the Oscar-winning *The Ghost and the Darkness* (1996).

There are many theories explaining the behaviour of the beasts. Superstitious locals argued that the animals were evil spirits out to punish railway workers.

It has also been argued that lions in the area had a liking for human flesh as a result of the slave trade.

Another theory suggests that there had been an outbreak of rinderpest in the area that had affected the maneless lion and made them unable to hunt other animals and turned on human beings.

Scientists who examined lions in the 1990s concluded that the two infamous lions had suffered from infections

Bid to recover artefacts in the diaspora

If the National Museums of Kenya succeeds in getting back the recreations of the man-eaters of Tsavo, it will be another triumph for Kenya in recovering its cultural artefacts in the diaspora. Three artefacts that belonged to Nandi chief Kotalale arap Sameoi, who was killed by British colonial agents over a century ago, were repatriated from the UK last year. The artefacts - two clubs and a traditional stool that signify traditional authority among the Nandi - were returned to Eldoret after a local scholar, Mr Kimyango Seroney, traced them to a family in Shrewsbury, UK.

The items had been taken by a British soldier after the hero was killed in 1905. Kotalale was shot and beheaded by a military intelligence officer, Col Richard Meinertzhagen. Meinertzhagen also took away the head and his sandals. People are still demanding the repatriation of Kotalale's skull, sandals and his lion skin headgear from Britain.

The artefacts had been with Col Meinertzhagen's family until Mr Seroney, a doctorate student, contacted the former soldier's son Randle, 78, who agreed to have them returned to Nandi. Kotalale had led more than 8,000 warriors in a 10-year guerrilla war against the British colonial government. He was the hero of the Kenyan Nandi territory.

During the celebration of the late President Kibaki's death, Kotalale was killed as a national monument. He spent Sh55 million for the hero's return to the hero.

Stephen Mburu

Simba Mbili_02_Nairobi Railway Museum Display_(c)Hopkins and Nur Goni

We struggle to find a word that embraces the multiplicity of statuses that these lions have, and have had, in their century-old lives. Indeed, because of their previous afterlives as rugs, pieces of other lion skins were needed to turn them into museum specimens. We have become interested by those who call for a specific status of the specimens in natural history museums. (12) In the case of these two lions, their status becomes even more complex with the recent discovery of hundreds of human hairs which were hidden within the cavity of the lions' teeth from the dozen laborers killed in 1898. (13) Analysis such as this DNA testing further complicates not only what we might think the lions are, but what they might become, in a future of potentially endless data extraction. On another level, we wonder, whether their potential becoming might perhaps also include in the future their possible return?



Simba Mbili_03_Digital Render_(c)Schoenewolf Hopkins and Nur Goni

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1. Part of which is online, see: <https://www.inventoriesprogramme.org/explore>.
2. Cited in *The Man-eaters of Tsavo and other East-African adventures* (1907).
3. Recent studies have brought these figures to approximately 35 persons while in his book, J.H. Patterson evoked the number of 135 railway workers.
4. This sum corresponds to about 100.000 dollars by today's standards.
5. See BBC, "Kenya wants Tsavo man-eaters back", September 11, 2007, or more recently (December 5, 2023), Lucy Mkanyika, "Man eaters of Tsavo: Bring back the lions, Taita Taveta tells US Chicago museum", *The Nation*.
6. See the sound piece we presented in the frame of the International Inventories Programme exhibition, based on a vox populi conducted by Junniah Wamaitha in downtown Nairobi in 2021.
7. See, for instance in France, the works by Violette Pouillard (2019, 2022) or Eric Baratay (2017, 2019).
8. Such as long-term Paris Natural history museum taxidermist, Jack Thinay, who pleads for a specific status, cited in Lucienne Strivay, "Taxidermies. Le trouble du vivant", *Anthropologie et Sociétés*, vol. 39, no 1-2, 2015, pp. 259.
9. Although commonly known as Mau Mau, the resistance force was actually called the Land and Freedom Army. The British regime responded with brutal force, building concentration camps, and torturing suspected members of the movement. In 2013 the British government issued an official apology and paid compensation for these atrocities.
10. Chris Gosden, Frances Larson and Alison Petch, *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, 1884-1945*. Oxford, Oxford University

Press, 2007, cited in Adrian Van Allen, "Bird Skin to Biorepository: Making Materials Matter in the Afterlives of Natural History Collections", op. cit., p. 539.

11. Excerpt from Adrian Van Allen, "Bird Skin to Biorepository: Making Materials Matter in the Afterlives of Natural History Collections", Knowledge Organization, vol. 44, no. 7, 2017, p. 532.

12. For instance, our historian colleague Taushif Kara generously drew our attention to the fact that the "lions incident" prompted a discussion in the Indian press about the working conditions of the Indian laborers abroad, which we are currently enquiring into.

13. See Julian C. Kerbis Peterhans and Thomas Patrick Gnoske, "The Science of 'Man-Eating' Among Lions *Panthera leo* With a Reconstruction of the Natural History of the 'Man-Eaters of Tsavo'", *Journal of East African Natural History*, 90(1):1-40. 2001.