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The Community Speaks with Many Voices : Representing Cultural Heritage in the Smithsonian' s African Voices Exhibition

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The Community Speaks with Many Voices: Representing Cultural Heritage in the Smithsonian’s *African Voices* Exhibition

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1. Introduction

In December 1999, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History opened a new permanent exhibition of African and African Diaspora history and culture, *African Voices*. The making of this exhibit involved a commitment to an active collaboration between the museum and communities in Africa and the African Diaspora in the Americas. In developing the exhibit, the team included different perspectives and “voices” in the individual galleries and displays. Given that the museum is a public space, the team adopted the principle that only public and openly discussed information about objects and associated cultural practices within their source community should be included.

African Voices was six years in the making and involved content curators, educators, community specialists, scriptwriters, and designers working as a team.¹⁾ It includes over 400 historical and contemporary objects representing Africa’s long history and cultural diversity (Figure 1). It prominently features Africa’s rich intangible cultural heritage using proverbs, adages, oral histories, testimonies, poetry, song, music, performances, and soundscapes throughout the exhibition. The history corridor, *A Walk through Time*, serves as the central spine of the exhibit. It begins with the story of the emergence of humans in Africa five million years ago and ends with a changing display titled *Africa Today*²⁾ (Photo 1). Four main galleries flank the history corridor. Three galleries, *Living in Africa*, *Work in Africa* (Photo 2), and *Wealth in Africa*, are devoted to stories from continental Africa. The fourth gallery, *Global Africa*, emphasizes the prior and current dispersion of people of African descent worldwide. Contemporary stories are emphasized within these four galleries; however, they are historicized and chosen to complement stories presented along the history corridor. Urban and rural stories throughout Africa and within the African Diaspora provide a balanced representation of people’s contemporary lives. Two Crossroad galleries, *Ghana’s Makola Market* (Photo 3) and *The Kongo Diaspora to the Americas*, link the lateral galleries on either side of the history corridor. A *Focus Gallery* is devoted to temporary exhibits and has featured seven exhibits since its inauguration in December 1999. *The Freedom Theater* features two 20-minute films that run

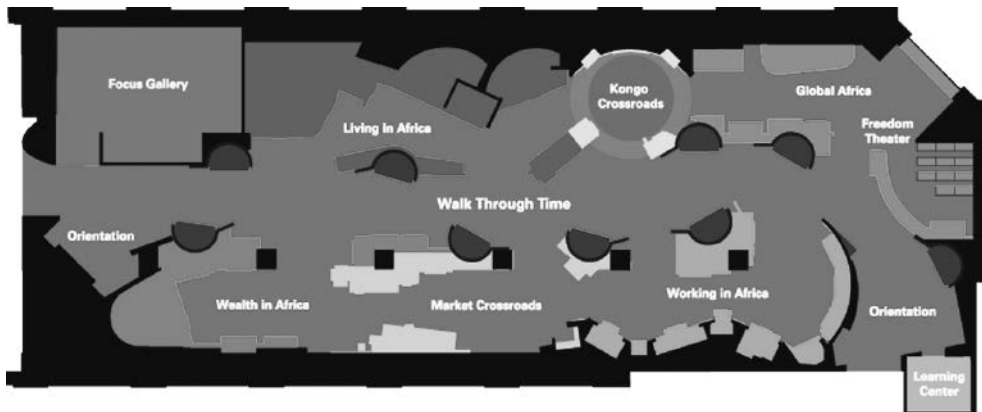


Figure 1 *African Voices* Exhibition Map. (Courtesy of the Imaging Department, NMNH, Smithsonian Institution)



Photo 1 *African Voices*.
Africa Today History Moment.
2019.
Local Research _ Global Impact.
(Photograph by James DiLoreto,
Courtesy of the Imaging
Department, NMNH,
Smithsonian Institution)



Photo 2 *African Voices*.
Working in Africa gallery.
(Photograph by Donald Hurlbert, Courtesy of the
Imaging Department, NMNH, Smithsonian
Institution)

consecutively throughout the day: *The Atlantic Slave Trade* and *The Struggle for Freedom in Africa*.³⁾

This essay explores three community collaborations in the development of *African Voices* that underscore the museum's efforts to highlight multiple voices and include different interpretations and perspectives within individual displays. The first features the participation of high school students in Malawi in a story of a Chewa masquerade; the



Photo 3 *African Voices.*
Makola Market yam vendor,
Comfort Kwakye.
(Photograph by Donald Hurlbert,
Courtesy of the Imaging
Department, NMNH,
Smithsonian Institution)

second presents a collaboration with three professionals concerning land rights, access, and resource management in the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania; and the third describes the process of community collaboration in the development of *Discovering Rastafari!*, a temporary exhibition within *African Voices* from November 2007 to November 2011.

2. *Kasiyamaliro*, a Chewa Masquerade

One of the featured objects in the *Living in Africa* gallery is a large antelope body mask, *Kasiyamaliro*, from the Chewa of Malawi (Photo 4). This masquerade appears in public performances in Chewa farming communities on the occasions of a boy's initiation, at burial and funerary rites, and at the installation of a chief. Today, the *Kasiyamaliro* masquerade also appears at political rallies and national day celebrations and during Christmas Day festivities. Although this masquerade performance is public, its secrets are known only to initiated members of the *Nyau* association.⁴⁾

Given that many of our visitors are students, the exhibition especially focused on including young people's commentary where appropriate. The focus on the public performance of the Chewa masquerade was an opportunity to include student voices. The team worked with Adam Michaelides, an American Peace Corps volunteer teaching at the Dowa Secondary School in Mporela, Malawi. With permission from the school, he asked his students to write short essays on what the Chewa masquerade means to them and what they would like Americans visiting the exhibition at the Smithsonian to know about it. Excerpts from student essays serve as interpretive content for the masquerade. A group



Photo 4 *African Voices.*
The Kasiyamaliro masquerade from the Chewa of Malawi. (Photograph by Donald Hurlbert, Courtesy of the Imaging Department, NMNH, Smithsonian Institution)



Photo 5 *African Voices.*
The Chewa *Kasiyamaliro* masquerade story installation. A text rail includes a photograph of the students who participated in the project and excerpts from their essays. (Photograph by Donald Hurlbert, Courtesy of the Imaging Department, NMNH, Smithsonian Institution)

photograph of the students who contributed essays is included in the text rail, giving a face to the commentary (Photo 5).

Without violating any association secrets, the students' comments present a range of perspectives on the masquerade. Several essayists spoke to the origin of the masquerade in the distant past, while others wrote about its construction. Most reiterated the belief in the masquerade's essential association with spirits and ancestors. "When there is death, the burial ceremony is done by Gule Wamkulu [masqueraders]. This dance is for spirits"—Jephter Banda. "I feel and believe the Kasiyamaliro is a kind of transfigured ancestral spirit as it is said by the elders of the dance" and "Even though the mask is made by men, we believe that the Kasiyamaliro comes from the ground"—Jimmi Njirisi.

Several students spoke to the power of the masquerade, and a few wrote about their ambivalent feelings toward it. "The mask brings out trouble, danger, and happiness among the people"—Mackson Msokera. Others spoke regretfully about the current changes in cultural practices, "Nyau dance is deteriorating since people are forsaking their culture, which is not good at all!"—Jimmi Njirisi. Others highlighted their pride in the masquerade as part of a Chewa cultural heritage. "When I see this mask, I feel happy that my tribe 'CHEWA' [exists] since each tribe is best known by its culture"—Postani Kawala. The comments by the students gave the story an immediacy and contemporary feel. Their essays allude to long-held and deep beliefs that address current changes in Chewa cultural values and practices. The idea of continuity and change and a long

history and vibrant present are key themes explored in this story that find expression throughout *African Voices*.

3. Work in the Ngorongoro Crater

Tanzania's Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) was founded in 1959 as a multi-land use area. It supports abundant wildlife and is a prime tourist destination. Unlike national wildlife parks that exclude human activity, the NCA's stated goal is to develop Maasai communities, conserve wildlife, and foster tourism. This exhibition story poses the question, "Can People and Wildlife Coexist in Ngorongoro?" (Photo 6). The challenge for Tanzania and the NCA is finding a balance that works.

The story was developed with the participation of three professional colleagues: Dr. Naomi Kapury, a Maasai anthropologist working on development issues in Kenya and Tanzania; Deo-Gratias M. Gamassa, an ecologist and professor at Mweka College of Wildlife Management in Tanzania; and Paul Mshanga, the Head of Tourism at Ngorongoro Crater. The intention to present a story with different perspectives about land use and work in the Crater was discussed with each colleague prior to agreeing to participate in the project. In a series of in-person and telephone interviews in Tanzania,

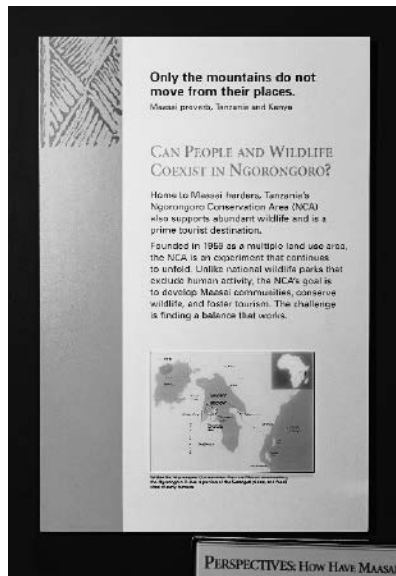


Photo 6 *African Voices*.
Ngorongoro Crater story. Main
Gallery Label "Can People and
Wildlife Coexist in Ngorongoro?"
(Photograph by James DiLoreto,
Courtesy of the Imaging
Department, NMNH, Smithsonian
Institution)

each participant was asked to address three questions that speak broadly to the NCA's goals for managing the Crater: *How have Maasai herders coexisted with the wildlife in the Crater?*, *What are the conservation challenges in the Crater?*, and *How can tourism be best conducted at Ngorongoro?*

The exhibit story is divided into three sections with a focus on herding, conservation, and tourism (Photo 7). A large photo mural in each section depicts the specific type of work that is the focus of the display. Iconic objects in each section are related to specific types of work. Herding is represented by a Maasai cattle bell, a basketry milk container, and a wooden throwing club or *ringa*. Objects associated with wildlife conservation include a dart gun and darts, a rhino horn, and an elephant tusk (Photo 8). Representing the tourist experience are a Maasai man's face ruff and girl's beaded headdress, a group of commercial postcards depicting Maasai culture and wildlife in the Crater, and a 35mm camera.

Each of the three sections includes a large *point of view* panel with a photo of each participant next to their comment (Photo 9). The participants were given the opportunity to edit their quotes and choose how they wanted to be represented on the panel. For example, in the Conservation section, in response to the question on "What Are Ngorongoro's Conservation Challenges?," Deo-Gratias Gamassa, ecologist, is the first voice to note that, "The high Challenges human population increase creates many demands on land and is the major catalyst to the human-wildlife conflicts. The reasons for population change must be identified. The Conservation Area management should seek to understand the socio-economic aspirations and needs of the local Maasai." Dr. Naomi Kipury, Maasai anthropologist, Nairobi, Kenya, speaks to the long relationship between the Maasai and local wildlife and the current challenges they face: "If Maasai did not live the kind of life they live, there wouldn't be any wildlife to conserve. The



Photo 7 *African Voices.*
Ngorongoro Crater.
(Photograph by James DiLoreto, Courtesy
of the Imaging Department, NMNH,
Smithsonian Institution)



Photo 8 *African Voices.*
Ngorongoro Crater. Wildlife Conservation
case.
(Photograph by James DiLoreto, Courtesy
of the Imaging Department, NMNH,
Smithsonian Institution)

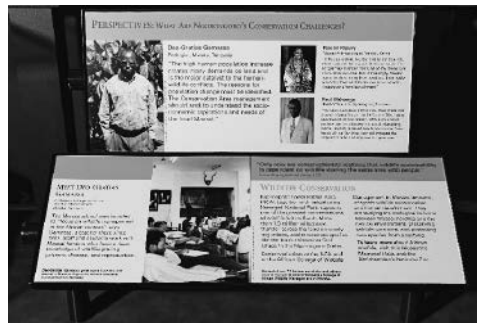


Photo 9 *African Voices*.
Ngorongoro Crater. Point of view label
“Perspectives: What are the Ngorongoro’s
Conservation Challenges?”
(Photograph by James DiLoreto, Courtesy
of the Imaging Department, NMNH,
Smithsonian Institution)

longer they maintain that kind of life, the longer the wildlife survives. But, increasingly, Maasai cannot make a living from livestock. Their cattle are dying from wildlife diseases transmitted to livestock and from lack of water.” Paul Mshanga, Head of Tourism, Ngorongoro, Tanzania, speaks of the devastating impact of wildlife poaching in the Crater and Tanzania’s programs to address critical conservation strategies: “We once had about 206 rhinos. Then there was a wave of poaching in the 1970s and 1980s. Today less than twenty rhinos remain. With such a small number, we are also worried about inbreeding. We’ve recently received two female rhinos from South Africa. We think they will increase the population a bit and improve the gene pool.”

The exhibit aims to introduce museum visitors to contemporary debates in Tanzania around land use, management, and conservation in the Crater and present different issues and viewpoints to highlight the complexity of the issues at stake. Hopefully, the Tanzanian story might resonate with our American visitors where similar debates and different views on land use and conservation are currently unfolding in their own communities.

4. Focus Gallery: *Discovering Rastafari! 2007–2010*

Discovering Rastafari!, a temporary exhibition that opened in 2007 in *African Voices*, featured the history of Rastafari, a religious, cultural, and revolutionary liberation movement that emerged in oppressed black communities in colonial Jamaica during the 1930s and today spans the Caribbean archipelago and five continents (Photo 10). The exhibit development involved collaborations with a large cross-section of the Rastafari community in the United States, Jamaica, and elsewhere in the Caribbean and in Africa. Although these collaborations were highly rewarding, they were also fraught with tension.

Through paintings, maps, texts, and personal testimonies in video interviews and texts, the exhibit explored the foundational history of the movement and its fundamental beliefs and sacred practices. It documented the spread and current impact of the movement globally through the vehicle of popular culture and music and the influence of delegations of Jamaican Elders who traveled across the Atlantic world. The exhibition was visually dense, layering objects, rare memorabilia, artwork, images, text panels, and the voices of Rastafari adherents themselves to create a vibrant and informative view of the movement (Photo 11). The film produced for the exhibit includes testimonies by Rastafari members that address the key exhibit themes. In this film, men and women of various ages and social positions speak about the history of the movement, its sacred practices, their collective struggles to build communities and a culture, and their vision of Africa. Their commentary is compelling and personal; it underscores the fact that in its contemporary global context, the Rastafari movement is heterogeneous in race, gender, class, ideological orientations, ethnicity, and national boundaries.

Discovering Rastafari! was five years in the making and is based on nearly 25 years of original archival and field research by Dr. John Homiak, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History anthropologist, and his colleague, the late Professor Carole Yawney of York University, Toronto.⁵⁾ At its core was Homiak and Yawney’s commitment to engaging Rastafari communities in developing the project—something possible only because each had developed longstanding relationships with key members of the movement in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean. However, winning the trust of the broader Rastafari community in Jamaica was not an easy task and was accomplished with varying degrees of success. Persecuted for their beliefs and practices during the movement’s first five decades of development (1930s–1970s), the Rastafari traditionally took a guarded approach to outsiders and have been highly skeptical of scholars. The latter are typically seen as lacking a commitment to properly understand or represent the movement. Alternatively, they have been characterized as “spies” or dupes who gather



Photo 10 Entrance to the *Discovering Rastafari!* exhibit.
(Photograph by James DiLoreto, Courtesy of the Imaging Department, NMNH, Smithsonian Institution)



Photo 11 Inside the *Discovering Rastafari!* exhibit. Wall paintings and video interview with Rastafari elder.
(Photograph by James DiLoreto, Courtesy of the Imaging Department, NMNH, Smithsonian Institution)

information to channel back to the citadels of Babylon (i.e., dominant oppressive society) as a means of controlling the movement. This mistrust of scholars extends to many mainstream institutions, including museums, suspicions which reflect the fact that most Rastafari have had little or no experience with museums, seeing them as places where the artifacts of “dead” or “dying cultures” are put on display for curiosity seekers.

Homiak and Yawney’s first step was to constitute an advisory group from the various Rastafari communities that could command broad trust and acceptance across the wider movement. This required dealing with the highly decentralized nature of the movement and navigating its sectarian politics, often fraught with dissent and distrust. One important turning point for the exhibit was fieldwork conducted in Ethiopia in 2002. Members of the Rastafari settler community who have “repatriated” themselves from various sites in the Diaspora to Ethiopia could launch the concept of this exhibition as a positive effect. For the Rastafari, in general (irrespective of their specific backgrounds), including the settler story acknowledged the importance members attach to their self-identification as Africans and their professed need to maintain a collective presence on the African continent.

Most US-based Rastafari who came to the exhibit over the four years of the exhibition were extremely proud and positive about the experience. Their largely positive reception of the exhibit reflected the fact that the museum was willing to develop a collaborative process with the community in determining the themes of the exhibit they perceived as central to their practices and experiences. They also saw the exhibition as a high-profile corrective to much of the negative press received by US-based Rastafari during the 1980s and the 1990s. In 2007, at the opening of the exhibit, a young Rasta from Washington said to me, “I have walked by this museum my entire life, but I never went in, as I didn’t think there was anything for me inside.”

However, in Jamaica, this situation was more complex. Some people worked closely with the curators and were positive about the exhibit. However, others remained wary and saw the exhibit as an example of cultural exploitation. As Homiak has so aptly observed, “All forms of cultural representation and collaboration are fraught within the Rastafari movement where there are no centralized structures of authority and there is an active and dynamic ‘underlife’ that periodically ruptures and percolates into the public sphere ... all forms of community consensus are provisional and subject to revision and reinterpretation.”⁶⁾

Revision and reinterpretation were manifested in Jamaica in 2012 with the convergence of two events that raised issues around the protection of Rastafari cultural heritage. First, the Institute of Jamaica announced its plans to create a Rastafari exhibition, proposing the launch to rebrand its museum section as the National Museum of Jamaica. This led to public and vocal critiques by members of local Rastafari communities, centered on their intellectual property rights and issues of the state’s appropriation of their cultural heritage. *Rastafari: Unconquerable!* opened in 2013. In a press interview, Jonathan Greenland, the Director of the National Museum, said of the making of the exhibit, “We had to do a lot of community negotiations, both from an individual level and also on a large scale. We were able to meet with the elders of the

different communities (of Rastafari) all over Jamaica. It's based on constant negotiations from individuals."⁷⁾

Around the same time the exhibit was being developed, Snoop Dog, the American Rapper, was on an extended visit to Jamaica to record a crossover reggae-rap CD. In Jamaica, he converted to Rastafari and took the name *Snoop Lion*. Most informed observers saw his conversion as an effort at rebranding, the title of his CD *Reincarnated* suggesting as much. In Jamaica, Snoop Dog and his crew filmed ceremonies held by the Nyahbinghi congregation and later used some of this footage in a music video promoting his new Rastafari identity.⁸⁾ The music video did not sit well with some members of the Nyahbinghi community, one of whom is Jamaica's ranking reggae-dancehall artist Sizzla Kalonji. What followed was a classically Jamaican lyrical putdown by Sizzla, who publicly attacked Snoop and accused him of violating the ritual protocols of the Nyahbinghi sacred space, the commercialization of Rasta cultural heritage, and the infringement of the intellectual property of Rastafari. In his 2012 song entitled "Burn Out the Smithsonians," Sizzla called out the Smithsonian Institution, the Institute of Jamaica, the University of the West Indies, and Snoop Dog as agents of Babylon and cultural pirates.⁹⁾

5. Conclusion

The Chewa masquerade and the Ngorongoro Crater stories are only two of the many stories in the permanent exhibit that involved active engagement with community members, artists, and cultural specialists within Africa.¹⁰⁾ As the three community collaborations reveal, how the museum team engaged with source communities in representing African and African Diaspora cultural heritage and to what effect often took quite different paths. The interaction with the Malawian high school students was not direct but mediated by their teacher, who provided his students with information about the museum project. The engagement with the three professionals for the Ngorongoro Crater story involved an initial presentation of the story's objectives to each participant, followed by a series of interviews with three broad questions. Developing the *Discovering Rastafari!* exhibiting the engagement between the museum and Rastafari communities in Jamaica, Africa, and Washington had many positive outcomes. However, it was often fraught with tensions around issues of trust in the museum. Most of the Rastafari community members in Jamaica and Washington were supportive of this exhibit and saw the advantage of having a serious representation of Rastafari history and beliefs in a major museum. The collaboration was only possible because of the long-term relationships these communities had with the exhibition curators. However, even as the curators were embraced as part of solidarity, the Smithsonian Institution was publicly reviled five years later in Jamaica as new political circumstances gave rise to a strong minority voice that redrew some of the support lines for the exhibit in Washington and Jamaica.

Representing African and African Diaspora cultural heritage, whether from the perspective of mainstream groups or those marginalized in their societies, is like the

continuous loop of a Mobius strip. Managing the collaborations between the museum and source communities is never completely predictable or conflict-free, as these communities speak with many voices. Cultural heritage is a process and not a product. It is continually shaped by internal and external political and social forces. However, despite the pitfalls, the mutual respect from such collaborations between source communities and the museums is a worthwhile investment of time, effort, and resources.

Notes

- 1) There were four critical stages in the development of African Voices: The Idea Statement (1993), Concept Script and Design (1995), Final Script and Design (1998), and Audio Visual Development (1999). Given that this process occurred over a seven-year period, people moved in and out of the Development Team. *Content development*: Mary Jo Arnoldi (1993–99), Mark Auslander (1995–99), Linda Heywood (1994–99), Ivan Karp (1993–97), Christine Mullen Kreamer (1993–99), Michael Atwood Mason (1994–99), Sulyman Niang (1995–99), Fath Ruffins (1993–94), Theresa Singleton (1994–98), John Thornton (1994–99). *Designers*: Jim Simms (1993), Bennie Welch and Main Street Design (1994–95), Douglas Gallagher (1995–99). *Scriptwriters*: Sharon Barry (1993–96), Bee Wuethrich (1996–99). *Community specialists*: Philippa Jackson (1994–95), Austin Johnson (1995–98). *Educators*: Laura McKie (1993–95), Stephanie McKissic (1995–98). *Evaluators*: Science Learning Inc. (1993–99), Smithsonian Office of Institutional Studies (1999–2000). *Audiovisuals*: Northern Lights Production (1999). *Interactives*: Squid Country Safari (1999). *Website*: Terra Incognito (1999). The museum team also worked with a diverse Extended Team composed of Africans, African Americans, Africanists, and community leaders. Their counsel, numbering 120 in the project's early years and 60 in the later phases, was essential and resulted in a better final product.
- 2) Since the opening of the exhibition in December 1999, three different stories have been featured in the *Africa Today* display: a story on rural health challenges in Africa with a focus on community-based solutions in Kenya; a story on wildlife conservation in Africa focusing on local community efforts to conserve turtle breeding grounds around Lamu island; and, most recently in 2019, a story highlighting science in Africa, featuring joint excavations of dinosaurs on the Angolan coast by Angolan, Portuguese, and American paleontologists and their students.
- 3) See Kreamer (1997) and Arnoldi, Kreamer, and Mason (2001) for a detailed discussion of the making of the *African Voices* exhibit, its philosophy, exhibiting strategies, and the community collaborative process.
- 4) See Yoshida (1993) and Faulkner (1988) for discussions of the *Nyau* men's association and the *Kasiyamaliro* masquerade performances.
- 5) I would like to thank John Homiak, a curator for this exhibition, for sharing with me details of his collaborations with various Rastafari communities in the development of this exhibit. I would also like to thank him for his critical reading of this section and his editorial suggestions.
- 6) Personal communication from John Homiak (2012).
- 7) Thaffe, N. *The Gleaner*. July 22, 2013, np.

8) House of Nyahbinghi label in the *Discovering Rastafari!* exhibition, 2007.

“Named after an African anti-colonial movement, the House of Nyahbinghi is Rastafari’s oldest organization. Its many elders reworked Biblical prophesies, Ethiopian symbols, and African-Jamaican ideas about the power of nature to create the spiritual ore of the movement. They wore dreadlocks, innovated a style of drumming—also called Nyahbinghi—and developed a distinctive dialect as symbols of their African identity. In addition, they established the importance of roots and herbs, defending the use of cannabis as their sacrament. Nyahbinghi began celebrating groundations in the early 1950s. Later called Nyahbinghi, these events last three or seven days. They unite people “to praise Jah and chant down Babylon” with songs, drumming, and inspired conversations called reasonings. Nyahbinghi commemorate important dates for Rastafari, help recruit new members, and reaffirm participants’ experience as Africans-in-exile.”

9) Sizzla Kalonji (aka Miguel Collins) August 2012. You can hear Sizzla’s song at <http://urbanislandz.com/2012/06/29/sizzla-diss-snoop-dogg-beef-reggae-hip-hop-music/>. I would like to thank John Homiak for providing me with the information about the recent controversy surrounding the exhibit in Jamaica and for annotating the following verses of Sizzla Kalonji’s song.

“All you do is go around and record the sacred services in the holy temple of His Majesty and try to sell it, eh?”

Nothing is right, boy, nothing is cool...

Who de ras klatt Snoop Daag a try feh fool? [Who the hell does Snoop Dog think he’s fooling]

Tell ‘im say Emperor Selassie I a rule [Tell him that Emperor Selassie rules]
Him cyaan’t even get Selassie I stool.

Tell ‘im dis is not slavery days [tell him these are not slavery days]
De Babylon lady [Queen Elizabeth], she not get mi praises
Emperor Selassie I get daily praises
Nyahbinghi fiya haffa blaze

Mi ask Selassie I feh de crown, and...

Blaze up de chalice in de zone, and... [light the ganja pipe in my yard]

Mi haffa slap another roun’, an’ [I have to draw the pipe for another round]

Hotta fiya burn out Smithsonians! [ritual fire that cleanses adherents and destroys one’s enemies]

Education top-a-top, ya see... [It is education that rates in Jamaican society]

It matter wey yuh grab a chair an’ hab a property [Babylon only cares about your standing]

in society]

Because dis fiya neber stop, ya see... [but the Nyahbinghi ritual fire never ceases its vigilance]"

Because deh come feh tek your **intellectual property**. [because they come to take your intellectual property]

- 10) In addition to the three exhibit stories highlighted in this essay, there is, at least, one story in each gallery involving extensive participation with source communities, including the Makola Market story in *Market Crossroads*, the Somali *aqal* display in the *Living in Africa* Gallery, and videos featuring Vodun, Santeria, and Umbanda religious specialists in New York City in the *Global Africa* Gallery.

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