

BUSINESS DAILY

Thursday
July 12, 2012

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Kenyan sculpts his way to global prominence



Photo/Jacob Owiti Elkana Ong'esa: The sculptor's works are exhibited around the world.

No Kenyan artist has done more globe-trotting on the planet than Elkana Ong'esa.

The Kisii stone sculptor whose seven tonne 'Bird of Peace' known as *enyamuchera* stands at the UNESCO entrance in Paris and has done since 1976, has literally let his art take him all around the world: from Canada and the US, to Europe, China and Japan several times, to most corners of Africa, including Uganda where he studied fine art at Makerere University.

Mr Ong'esa even represented Kenya in New Zealand at the Commonwealth Games in 1990.

Yet to this day, the former university lecturer cum ad hoc arts ambassador for Kenya has never been paid one single cent by the Kenya Government who gave *Enyamuchera* as "a gift" to UNESCO.

What's worse, UNESCO's secretary general Amadou M'Bow had originally planned to pay the artist since it was he who asked for the Kisii stone bird when he first saw the one Mr Ong'esa had made for Joseph Murumbi in 1976.

"But the government told UNESCO not pay me as they would 'take care of it', but they never did. To this day, I am still waiting to be reimbursed," said Mr Ong'esa, who was in Nairobi to bring his and his students' sculptures to display African Heritage's 40th anniversary celebrations at Alliance Francaise.

New institute

Mr Ong'esa didn't stay in Nairobi long as he had to return to his newly established Africa Institute for Culture and Development, based in the quarry-rich region of Tabaka in Kisii County where he's training skilled stone carvers in new techniques and trade 'secrets' of entrepreneurship.

Having taught fine art for years in many places, including Kisii Teachers College, Baraton University, YMCA Craft Training Centre and Lingnan University in Hong Kong, Mr Ong'esa chose to establish his own art school in the heart of Kisii stone country for several reasons.

"One is because I want to teach survival skills to artists so they will be able to market and sell every item they create," he said.

"I don't believe artists can afford to create 'art for art's sake'; it must be able to earn them their daily bread or it doesn't help them at all," said Mr Ong'esa who disagrees with critics of Kenyan artists who claim they shouldn't care about sales but only focus on their art.

"Those critics don't know how we Africans struggle. If they did, they wouldn't call us mercenary. They don't appreciate the fact that a hungry person cannot create works of art," he said.

Working with a wide variety of material—from granite, basalt and wood to sandstone and various shades of Kisii stone, as one can see right now at Alliance Francaise, Mr Ong'esa says stone carving itself is physically taxing.

Up until recently, only men were artists and artisans in Kisii. Women were only involved in washing, sanding and polishing artworks made either by brothers, fathers or spouses, since stone carving in Kisii is still a family affair.

But at his Africa Institute, Mr Ong'esa has already begun training women stone carvers, two of whom are exhibiting their sculptures at Alliance's ground floor: Pamela Otieno and Miriam Nyasita Okondo.

Upstairs one will find Mr Ong'esa's latest works, 'The Prophet and the Crow' carved in basalt and 'The Masked Hero' in granite.

His wood sculptures are older, carved during the 2007-8 post-election violence.

To see his more monumental sculptures, one must go either to Nairobi's American Embassy to see his "Dancing Birds" or to Paris or to China where his 10-foot tall bronze piece entitled "Her Mother" stands in the Open Air Sculpture Park since 2005 when he first went to China on a six week artist's residency.

Meanwhile, Mr Ong'esa's pieces are scattered all over the planet, in Uganda where he got his bachelor degree at Makerere and in Montreal, Canada where he completed his masters while researching Inuit soap stone carving and their cooperative operations.

By that time, the Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society had already been established.

But once Mr Ong'esa returned to Kenya in the late 1980s, he helped restructure the Society using his knowledge of the Inuit cooperative model.

"The Canadian model cut out the middle man, so the cooperative markets Inuit carvings directly to buyers, leading to improved conditions for the artists," Mr Ong'esa said.

Boost living standards

His commitment to upgrading living standards of Kisii artisans has been a central incentive for Mr Ong'esa.

It's what got him involved in the Fair Trade movement, the Kenya Gatsby Trust and most recently the Lake Victoria Research Institute, all of which share his concern to see that artists be remunerated fairly and equitably.

The Africa Institute has essentially grown out of Mr Ong'esa's travels and seeing artists all over Africa need more control over how their works are marketed and sold.

"Otherwise, the middle man will continue to take the lion's share of profits and the artists will remain poor," he said.

So despite his own success, Mr Ong'esa remains grounded in Kisii County and in his concern for carvers to not only improve the quality of creative expression through learning new techniques and tools, but also he's committed to seeing they also learn entrepreneurship and other survival skills.

His one stipulation for admission to his institute is that applicants already work in the realm of stone carving.

"Our students will be welcoming sculptors from all over the world in August for the second International Stone Sculpture Symposium entitled 'Talking Stones'," Mr Ong'esa said.

Promising no luxury hotels for visitors coming from Hong Kong, New Zealand, Canada and elsewhere, he says everyone will be living in the village near the quarries.