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From the Editor

Ekenyagwechwechwecheria: Notes on Grief and Remembering Caroline Mose

Ekenyagwechwechwecheria: Notes on Grief and Remembering

I never got the pleasure of meeting the late Elkana Ong'esa in person. This is a fact I have sat with for the months we have been editing this Special Issue: from reading the tributes of those who knew him, to watching those that closely interacted with him over the course of his phenomenal life, both artistically and privately – all have attempted to give life, through words, to the meaning he brought to them. Sometimes, they have found that words fail – at least, words in the English language. The life and legacy of the late Elkana feel beyond words, beyond many forms of formal expression. They are as fluid, wonderful, and as transcendent as the depth of artistic expression that Elkana channeled through his work as a master sculptor. I sit with these thoughts even as I think of Elkana as the Uncle I never met, a root and shoot from the hills of Tabaka in Kisii County.

To speak of the late Elkana Ong'esa is to speak of an icon, a man, a teacher, a father, a grandfather, a master sculptor, a great inspirer, a roving ambassador, an advocate of the arts, an artist, and a human being. It is to speak of what he created and the legacy he leaves behind from all the facets of who he was - his family, his mentees and students, his networks, his friends and loved ones, and his body of artistic work. It is to think of the speech he left us with, the ways in which he gave us the language and vocabularies with which to approach life and death. And it is to understand the stories that emanate from him-self - his work, his life's journey, his experiences, his griefs, his triumphs, and most importantly, what we glean and learn from these stories.

I have stated above that words in the English language may, and do, fail to capture the full essence of what Elkana's work and legacy really are, and will be. And this brings me to one word that defined the ways in which he thought, how he captured moments like lighting in a bottle. It is the word that makes people's eyes twinkle with mirth and memory when Elkana's name comes up, because in that Kisii word, we transcend from a physical into a metaphysical and metaphorical understanding of life - *Ekenyagwechwechwecheria*. Yes - "that word" that is almost unpronounceable at speed, unless you are a native Ekegusii speaker. You fold your lips and tongue around the consonants of the word, and your voice comes out your throat in a halting manner, your brain wanting to rush through it, but knowing that if you do, you will miss it. You still attempt to rush through 'ekenyagwechera...' and you start again, because you can clearly see you missed it. Slowly, haltingly, deliberately, your brain must weave through the vowels and consonants - and you are tempted to just say "yeah, that one" and move on. But you stay there, you say the word, until you get it right the first time: ekenya-gwechwechachwe-cheria. Victory. A small one. And you keep going back until you get it right all the way through, while listening to a native speaker to get the cadence right.

Ekenyagwechwechwecheria. A type of a shiny, slippery, fast lizard, a now-you-see-it now-you-don't reptilian creature, and the word Elkana used to describe that most mysterious, impactful, unavoidable, painful, even traumatizing states of being; every human being will taste and experience: *Grief*. Elkana curated work that captured grief beyond the English word, describing it as being like this lizard after he lost his wife. According to his recorded conversations with his artistic partners, the organization TICA which supported and collaborated with him throughout, and whose tributes fill these pages, Elkana described the lizard as "...a being that changes colour like a chameleon, so it quickly blends into whatever

environment it is in. It seems to appear and disappear, you may try to follow it but quickly realise you can't, it can sneak up on you and seems to speak to you but you don't understand, it is everywhere and nowhere." Grief. Everywhere and nowhere. And like the word, something that must be navigated fully, all vowels and consonants, over and over again, and still one that cannot be 'caught' or mastered, only addressed when it sneaks up.

This Special Issue is our attempt to capture the spirit of *ekenyagwechwechachwecheria* – grief that sneaks up from nowhere at the loss of Elkana, (the subsequent and sudden loss of his son Samson in late 2025), and the many losses we all suffer as a collective. This includes the deep sense of loss Elkana and the art fraternity experienced at the debacle around the *Elephant Family* sculpture that was meant to spend its days in the United States at the Smithsonian, but never got there. This particular 2014 incident was particularly painful because it encapsulated the grief that artists and creators continue to experience in the current age, where their work is hardly compensated, and where majority live austere lives despite prolific bodies of work, always one illness away from an ignominious end.

Towards his final days, Elkana suffered from illness that eventually took him to the lands of the forefathers and mothers, perhaps before his time (and quite significantly, on his born-day). There is a deep need to revamp the ways in which we as artists live on and from our art, and Faith Amatika-Omondi's article speaks to this. This issue is filled with tributes from artists whose lives the late Elkana directly influenced, through his work as a teacher, mentor, trainer, and artist. Faith Amatika-Omondi suggests a visual artist's management organization in his honour, in the same vein as ELKOM, the Elkana Ong'esa Museum that has been established in Kisii. ELKOM is well represented in this issue, and aims to keep the works of the son of Tabaka's works alive for posterity.

Apart from his work as an artist, Elkana was also a family man - Dad, brother, uncle, sokoro. For his family, the loss has been deeper, more heartfelt. As always, Elkana's true north was his family, and his roots in Tabaka, roots that built him (both his parents were visual artists) and moulded him. From Tabaka, he rose, and in Tabaka, he rested, after traversing the length and breadth of the globe, including a spell with the Inuit people in arctic Canada. This issue also features these heartfelt tributes from his family, including one penned by his son before he tragically passed on to join his father in late 2025. These intimate family tributes are shared here for posterity, and capture the intricate nature of *ekenyagwechwechachwecheria*, a grief that while sharp and immediate, also becomes wistful, and holds memories that carry with them joy - joy that we experienced the man while he was alive, and will continue to experience him long after he has passed, not just through his artistic works, but also in the faces, eyes, laughter, mannerisms, beliefs, and idiosyncrasies of those that bear his name, and blood.

And in that joy, lies the multifaceted spirit of *ekenyagwechwechachwecheria*, that slippery reptilian creature - at once pain, joy, laughter, and remembrance. It informs us that Elkana is not really gone. Yes, he's no longer here physically. But he is present still through his work, his family, those he mentored and touched - at least for the foreseeable future. If it is the fate of man to walk the earth then disappear into a grave forever, then Elkana gets to linger a little longer. We get to speak his name in this Special Issue. And we get to pen it all and leave it here for generations to come, as long as this archive lives.

May Elkana Ong'esa, and Samson Ong'esa, rest in power.

From the Publisher

Kimani Njogu

The idea of a special issue of *Jahazi* in honor of Elkana Omweri Ong'esa was mooted in conversation with cultural scholar and author of *Kenya @50: Trends, Identities and the Politics of Belonging*, Dr. Joyce Nyairo. Dr. Nyairo had written an incisive article about Elkana that showed the visual artist's practice, mentorship and generosity over the years. It emerged in the conversation that a special issue of *Jahazi* would capture in one place how he would be remembered. This consensus of approach led to follow-up discussions with Dr. Mary Ann Burris, the Founder of TICA, and an admirer of Elkana. The Editorial Board endorsed the Special issue and a call for articles went out. We are grateful to Dr. Nyairo for these initial ideas.

I knew Elkana Ong'esa as an immensely gifted visual artist. Born in Kisii County, he studied at Makerere University, Uganda, and McGill University, Canada from where he attained a Masters degree in Education. Due to his commitment to visual arts, he was elected President of the Pan-African Association of Visual Artists (PAAV) in 2009. During his tenure, PAAV assisted many African artists gain international visibility and exposure. He also ran the annual international "African Stones Talk Sculpture Symposium" and started the "Africa Institute for Culture and Development Studies (AFRICUDS).

In addition to teaching, Elkana held exhibitions in different parts of the world. His significant sculptures include "The Elephant Family" (2014 Smithsonian Festival), 'Bird of Peace' (UNESCO Headquarters, Paris) and 'In Search of Water' (Caltex Oil Co., Texas, USA). He also created the "Elkana's Elephant", a miniature Kisii stone model of the life size granite elephant that was meant to be shipped to Washington, as the centerpiece of Kenya's contribution to the 2014 Smithsonian Summer Festival. The life size granite elephant symbolized Kenya's commitment to protecting the endangered species threatened by poachers. Unfortunately, the Kenya government reneged on the promise to send the elephant to Washington DC by air, where Kisii stone artists had planned to complete the elephants.

While visual artists in Africa have created for centuries, the appreciation of their work is largely dominated by non-African institutions. This is due to, among other factors, economic disparities, invisibility in public education, and limited support for art-related books, magazines or exhibitions on the continent. Despite these challenges, artists have continued creating their three dimensional works of art using the medium of solid material such as wood, ivory, metal and stone. Kenyan sculptors have generally worked on wood and stone.

Historically, two categories of sculptural work can be discerned in Kenya: secular and ritual. On the one hand, secular related sculptured art has tended to symbolically mark social, economic, political and religious power. Symbolic power would be manifested in caryatid stools, walking staffs, spears, snuff containers, drums, household wooden utensils, and furniture. Artists may also present in the sculpture their appreciation and interpretation of the natural environment.

It is significant that Elkana chose to defend the Elephant Family, threatened by human excesses. Elephants are key ecosystem engineers that strengthen biodiversity through seed dispersal, creating water holes, creating pathways, and supporting habitants for other animals in forests and the savanna. They also contribute in enhancing our knowledge

about the animal world. We know, for example, that African elephants are capable of addressing each other with “individually specific calls” as they communicate. These vocal interactions dataset suggests that elephants have names for each other, a feature that is often assumed to be limited to humans.

Elkana was also committed to peace and inter-ethnic understanding. Using his art, he responded to the violence that followed the 27th December 2007 general elections in Kenya which had led to the death of at least 1,200 people. On January 1, 2008 the Kenya Assemblies of God church in Kiambaa, Eldoret, was set ablaze and at least 30 people who had sought refuge there died and over fifty suffered serious burns. Wide ranging attempts were made to try and resolve the violence. Elkana recognized and appreciated the role of the international community in ‘building bridges’ and communicated this through his sculpture. Sculpturing was for him, at that time, a tool for capturing and reconstructing collective memory.

This Special Issue is our contribution to the memory of this towering visual artist. It is a privilege to publish the tributes.

We are grateful to the family of Elkana Ong’esa and the Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH) for the support provided during the development of this issue.



Elkana at Work

Visual Art and Education in Kenya

Agatha Nangila Karani

Visual arts and education are deeply intertwined in shaping our nation's intellectual, cultural, and economic development. In Kenya, visual arts have evolved from traditional cultural and indigenous expressions into contemporary academic disciplines taught at all levels of schooling. Our country has undergone educational reforms—from colonial-era education to the 8-4-4 system and now the Competency-Based Education (CBE). The place of visual arts in schools has reflected broader social, political, and economic changes. By embracing visual arts education, Kenya harnesses creativity, heritage, and future of the nation. This article briefly examines the meaning of visual arts and education, the history of art in the educational system, its transformation across curricula, and its role in national development and the creative economy.

What are visual arts?

Visual arts are forms of artistic expression that are primarily visual. They include drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking, ceramics, photography, graphic design, textile design, architecture, and contemporary digital arts. Visual arts communicate ideas, emotions, values, and cultural identity through images, shapes, textures, and colours.

In traditional Kenyan communities, visual arts were woven into daily life. Beadwork among the Maasai and Turkana, pottery among the Kamba, wood carving along the Coast, stone carving among the Kisii, mural paintings in rural homes, basket weaving, and body adornment were not merely decorative; they carried cultural, spiritual, and social significance. These forms of art were practical, functional, and symbolic.

Today, the visual arts extend beyond tradition to include fine art, commercial art, fashion, animation, advertising, and multimedia design. These forms bridge heritage and modern innovation. A walk through the corridors of any shopping mall or along any road will attest to this.

Visual arts and the curriculum

Education is the structured process of acquiring knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that enable individuals to develop intellectually, socially, morally, and economically. It prepares learners to contribute meaningfully to society. Education is not merely about passing examinations; it is about nurturing creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and lifelong learning. Within the formal system, education is guided by a curriculum. A curriculum is intended to meet a nation's needs. It should reflect national goals, cultural identity, economic aspirations, and social values. Therefore, the inclusion or exclusion of visual arts in education reflects a nation's values regarding creativity and practical skills.

Why visual arts in schools?

Studying art is essential for several reasons. Creativity relies on both thinking and logic. Art is more than talent; it involves observation, imagination, planning, analysis, and evaluation. When students create a composition or sculpture, they apply logical reasoning

and problem-solving skills. Art also offers emotional expression and supports mental health by providing a safe space for self-expression, fostering emotional growth, and boosting confidence. Additionally, art helps communities preserve their cultural traditions and heritage. It promotes innovation and entrepreneurship by fostering design thinking, which is vital across industries such as fashion, architecture, advertising, film, and digital media. Lastly, art education prepares students for many careers in the creative economy.

Visual arts have been evolving

Visual art has existed since time immemorial. In the Bible, for example, we are told that God commissioned Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur to produce a piece of art (Exodus 31:1-5). In prehistoric times, early humans created cave paintings and carvings. In Kenya, rock art at sites such as Lake Turkana and Tsavo show that artistic expression dates back thousands of years. African art traditions predate colonial influence and were taught informally through apprenticeship. Formal art education in Kenya began during the colonial period, though it was limited in scope and access. During colonial rule, visual art was used to advance colonial interests, and education was similarly structured for that purpose. Academic subjects such as mathematics and language were prioritised. Visual arts were largely confined to missionary schools and were often treated as crafts rather than intellectual disciplines.

Fine Art education was controlled and limited, primarily to white schools and a few elite institutions. But why was it restricted to white schools? Colonial administrators believed Africans should receive vocational training to serve as labourers and artisans, not as intellectuals or creative professionals. Creative disciplines that fostered independent thinking were often curtailed.

After independence in 1963, Kenya sought to Africanise education. Art was introduced into teacher-training colleges and secondary schools. Institutions such as Kenyatta College (which became Kenyatta University College and then Kenyatta University) and the University of Nairobi, began offering art programmes.

The 1981 Mackay Commission, chaired by Prof. Colin Mackay, transformed Kenya's education by recommending the 8-4-4 system to promote self-reliance through practical and vocational training. It also introduced Moi University. At the outset of the 8-4-4 system, there was a *Jua Kali* boom. The *Jua Kali* sector—informal artisans working in metalwork, carpentry, mechanics, and crafts—expanded rapidly. The curriculum was designed to produce self-reliant graduates with practical skills.

Although art and craft were included, implementation was hampered by a lack of materials, trained teachers, and facilities. Over time, academic subjects overshadowed creative ones amid exam-oriented competition. The visual arts lessons taught in the lower primary schools were ignored, and some were removed from the teaching timetables. The few schools that offered this learning area reduced the number of lessons allocated within the curriculum.

The same challenges are now being encountered under the Competency-based Education (CBE) 2-6-6-3, proposed in The Douglas Odhiambo report (Taskforce, 2012), which was set up to realign the education sector with the Constitution of Kenya 2010. One of the key factors was the global shift towards Competency-Based Education.

International trends in education reform also influenced the report. There was growing recognition that modern education should: develop competencies and life skills, promote creativity and innovation and prepare learners for the knowledge economy. The shortage of teachers is one of the greatest challenges. The demand for teachers of Fine Art and design exceeds market requirements.

The potential of visual arts

Despite the potential of visual arts, there has always existed generational tension in which older members of society associate visual art with 'handwork', as it was called in colonial times. It was associated with manual labour of low social status. White-collar jobs were seen as socially superior, and skilled trades were considered for those who had "failed" academically. This mindset persisted even after independence and continues to this day. As a result, art and technical subjects are undervalued. Ironically, the same generation relies heavily on artisans—carpenters, tailors, mechanics—whose skills are essential.

To train as an educationist in the visual arts, one can pursue a Bachelor of Education in Fine Arts, which combines artistic and pedagogical training. Students study drawing, painting, sculpture, and design; art history and criticism; educational psychology; curriculum development; and art teaching methods. Graduates are equipped not only to practise art but also to teach it professionally in schools. These programmes are essential for improving the quality of visual arts education.

Competency-Based Education (CBE) focuses on developing competencies rather than rote memorisation. It emphasises skills such as creativity, communication, critical thinking, and citizenship. CBE prioritises the mastery and practical application of skills over theoretical knowledge. In the visual arts curriculum, students demonstrate their competence by producing artworks, compiling portfolios, and addressing design challenges.

One might ask whether this will meet the nation's needs. CBE aims to nurture talent and practical skills. In theory, it supports the visual arts by encouraging learners to explore creative pathways early. It aligns with the needs of a modern economy that values innovation. However, its success depends on implementation—specifically, the availability of trained teachers, materials, and infrastructure. Reports have highlighted major inadequacies in these areas.

Do the stakeholders, teachers and parents understand what the learners undertake across the different Visual Arts Educational Levels? Children progress through different stages of artistic development as they grow. At early childhood levels, most often in pre-school, visual art supports child development by enhancing fine motor skills through drawing, cutting, and colouring. It also supports cognitive development by helping children recognise shapes and colours. Children develop emotional expression and social skills through group activities. Children explore through play, including finger painting, clay modelling, and collage.

At the start of primary school, in Grades 1 to 3, children engage in drawing from imagination and observation, simple crafts, colour mixing, and basic pattern-making. The focus is on exploration and enjoyment rather than technical perfection. Parents, teachers and carers are encouraged to provide materials that support the development of these skills.

In upper primary, which spans Grades 4 to 6, children develop better coordination and attention to detail, and an understanding of the elements of art, such as line, shape, colour, and texture. They also develop cultural appreciation and can undertake simple design projects. Artistic development progresses from creating symbolic drawings to producing more realistic representations.

Teenagers who usually enjoy studying visual art tend to develop critical thinking and appreciate artworks. They are more analytical and, as such, can explore media such as painting, sculpture, and digital art. Parents should encourage them to build portfolios that can serve as a foundation for career development.

At Senior School, between Grades 10 and 12, learners specialise in fine art and study more advanced techniques. They also study art history (local and global), contemporary art practices, entrepreneurship in art, and portfolio preparation. This prepares learners for higher education

or direct entry into creative careers. They are encouraged to study the visual works of local artists of their choice. Some of these artists serve as mentors to budding artists. Prominent educators include Elimo Njau, a pioneering artist and educator who founded Paa ya Paa Arts Centre in Nairobi; Elkana Ong'esa; Gerald Motondi; Orchardson Mazrui; Anne Mwiti; Patrick Mukabi; Moses Nyawanda; Asaph Ngugi; and Michael Soi, among many others. Incorporating visual arts into education fosters creativity and innovation, enhances problem-solving skills, promotes cultural pride, provides career flexibility, and supports national economic growth.

Careers in the visual arts include roles such as fine artist, graphic designer, illustrator, fashion designer, interior designer, architect, animator, art teacher, art therapist, curator, photographer, film set designer, product designer, and advertising creative director. The creative economy is among the fastest-growing sectors worldwide. Visual arts are present in our community through murals and graffiti, advertising billboards, fashion and textiles, church decorations, public monuments, cultural festivals, craft markets such as Maasai Market, and digital media and branding, shaping our daily visual environment.

Kenya can benefit from the visual arts by promoting cultural tourism, supporting creative industries, encouraging youth entrepreneurship, exporting crafts and fashion, and investing in animation and digital design, as countries such as South Korea have leveraged creative industries to enhance their global influence.

The role of visual arts in the creative economy spans industries such as film and television production, advertising, publishing, fashion, gaming, animation, and cultural tourism. Examples of each area include film and television production (movies and TV series); advertising (marketing campaigns and commercials); publishing (books and magazines); fashion (clothing design and accessories); gaming and animation (video games and animated films); and cultural tourism (art museums and festivals). Art not only fosters employment but also generates foreign exchange.

How can Kenya support Visual Arts?

Creative arts funds can be established as soon as some learners complete their secondary education. Many of these learners are already skilled in areas that can generate income. The current funding mechanisms, including the Nyota programme, can support many young people in this sector.

Although the Ministry of Education hosts the National Music and Drama Festival, the visual arts have been excluded from national festivals. A **National Visual Arts Festival** would provide a valuable opportunity for many budding artists to showcase their talent.

Curriculum reforms under the CBE should recognise the visual arts as a core learning area, equip as many schools as possible, and reduce the workload so that learners can begin to specialise in areas of strength within the visual arts. There appears to be a disconnect among various state agencies within the Ministry of Education (MoE) regarding the requirements for visual arts education. The teacher shortage in this area must be addressed. The Teachers Service Commission insists that a teacher must have two teaching areas. This is not possible for fine arts teachers, as the scope of this learning area is broad and largely practical, while remaining learner-centred. There should be in-service training for art teachers to sensitise them to the scope of the current curriculum. The MoE and policymakers should encourage positive attitudes and engagement among all stakeholders in Art and Design education, particularly in relation to the growth of the creative economy.

There are very few university programmes in the visual arts, and only a few universities offer them. Institutions that have shaped Kenya's visual arts curriculum, mentorship culture, and professional artistic development include the University of Nairobi's Department of Art and Design, Kenyatta University's School of Creative Arts and Film Technology, Buruburu Institute of Fine Arts, a key training centre for practicing artists, and Kuona Artists Collective, which offers residencies, workshops, and mentorship to emerging artists.

From having none in 1982, China now boasts over 450 design schools. Design is one of the most popular majors at Chinese universities, producing roughly 10,000 new graduates a year who join hundreds of new consulting firms opening offices and thousands of Chinese firms seeking not to emulate but to innovate (Yu, Chan, & Ireland, 2007, p. 12). How can Kenya expect to become a creative and industrial economy? Our country cannot expect to innovate if it is not investing in the creative part of education. While there are initiatives related to the creative economy, a more structured approach to investment is required.

Challenges facing the visual arts in education include low enrolment, as students often opt for the sciences for perceived job security. There is also a shortage of teachers, with few trained art teachers employed. Many schools lack facilities such as studios, materials, and equipment. Additionally, negative attitudes from some parents and administrators undervalue visual art. Finally, an examination-oriented culture does not support creative subjects, as evaluation in these areas relies on skill rather than grades.

How can the government mitigate these challenges? One way is to recruit more art teachers. Additionally, investing in infrastructure and materials can make a significant difference. Promoting public awareness campaigns can help garner support for art programmes. Integrating art into national development plans ensures it receives the attention it needs. Providing scholarships and grants can support aspiring artists and educators. Finally, strengthening partnerships between the industry and schools can enhance practical training and job opportunities.

Universities can invest in more visual arts programmes, conduct research in art education, and collaborate more with the industry. Additionally, they can offer community outreach programmes, encourage the establishment of innovation hubs and incubation centres, and provide short courses in digital arts and entrepreneurship. By doing so, universities can bridge the gap between education and industry. These universities and other institutions of higher learning also need to update their curricular to further be ready for the Senior School graduates who are slated to join university from 2029 onwards – we only have three years until the pioneer CBE class joins university. The time to complete final preparations is upon us.

Conclusion

Visual arts and education in Kenya reflect the nation's journey from colonial restriction to modern innovation. Once confined and undervalued, the visual arts now stand at the centre of competency-based education and the creative economy. Creativity requires thought, logic, and imagination. It is not inferior to academic disciplines; it complements them.

A curriculum must serve a nation's needs. As Kenya seeks industrialisation, job creation, and cultural preservation, the visual arts offer powerful tools to achieve these objectives. From early grades through tertiary, learners develop skills that equip them not only to become artists but also innovators and entrepreneurs.

The challenge is to change attitudes, invest in infrastructure, train teachers, and recognise that art is not a luxury but a necessity for national growth. If well supported, the visual arts can transform Kenya's economy, empower youth, and strengthen cultural identity. Kenyan visual artists have the potential to achieve 'designed and made in Kenya' tags on most of the imported products flooding our local market.

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Mother and child: Elkana Ong'esa's influence in the works of Gerard Motondi

Anne Mucheke

The teacher and his student. The chisel and its mallet. The craftsmanship of soapstone carving within the Kisii community of South western Kenya was built through apprenticeship from fathers, grandfathers and in later instances, the community in general, including women.

Elkana Ong'esa, the skilled, eminent soapstone sculptor from the Gotichaki hills of Tabaka in Kisii, grew up learning this trade under the tutelage of his father, grandfather and uncles like Alex Mogendi. In an interview with Marlena Chybowska-Butler for *Transcultural Perspectives in Art and Art Education*¹, he mentions his father gifting him the carving of a toy car which he thought was a real car. From there, he began to work with different materials such as clay and small pieces of stone before moving to soapstone and metals.

It was knowledge of diverse art forms and Ong'esa's curiosity that would elevate the Kisii soapstone from locally crafted to internationally recognized art. When Ong'esa left home for Makerere University in the 1960's, he brought back the academic concept of working with soapstone. At Makerere, he encountered the creation of diverse art forms as well as use of different tools in creating sculptures. It is this appreciation that he took back to his community in Tabaka and began transforming the value of the Kisii soapstone through his new creations and strengthening the community's cooperatives for better economic value.

A talented craftsman, his skill began showing in high school. One of his teachers, Mrs Janet Green, realised this and pushed him to enter a competition initiated by the *Kenya Freedom from Hunger* campaign. Elkana Ong'esa won the competition with his carving, *Daily Bread* (1965) which depicted an emaciated human form with protruding ribs eating maize on a cob.

Just like his high school teacher who had seen his potential as a young man, Elkana would later single out some of his own students exposing them to platforms that would propel them to higher places. Many of his students have publicly hailed Mwalimu Elkana as having played a profound role in their training in sculpting. One of these is Lydia Galavu, who is now a curator at the National Museums of Kenya. Sam Mogendi, his son, also followed in his footsteps as an artist before meeting his untimely death late in 2025. One sculptor, Gerard Motondi, stands out on account of the late Elkana's influence on his work. We examine his relationship with Elkana and what traces he left on Motondi's works.

There are a few life's coincidences between Elkana Ong'esa's paths and that of Motondi. Both came from Tabaka, with their homesteads not far from each other. They were therefore exposed to the abundance of soapstone and how to manipulate and create value from it.

In an interview for Jahazi² Motondi shares that he was very close to the Ong'esa family. When Elkana's father could not reach him in Eldoret where he eventually settled, it was Motondi who would be sent to undertake the role of messenger. He was also Elkana's friend, encouraging him through the loss of his first wife, and later when he got ill.

¹A-conversation-with-elkana-ong'esa *Transcultural Perspectives in Art and Art Education*

²Interview with Gerard Motondi, Thursday 18th September, 2025, Nairobi, Kenya. Interview with Gerard Motondi, Thursday 18th September, 2025, Nairobi, Kenya.

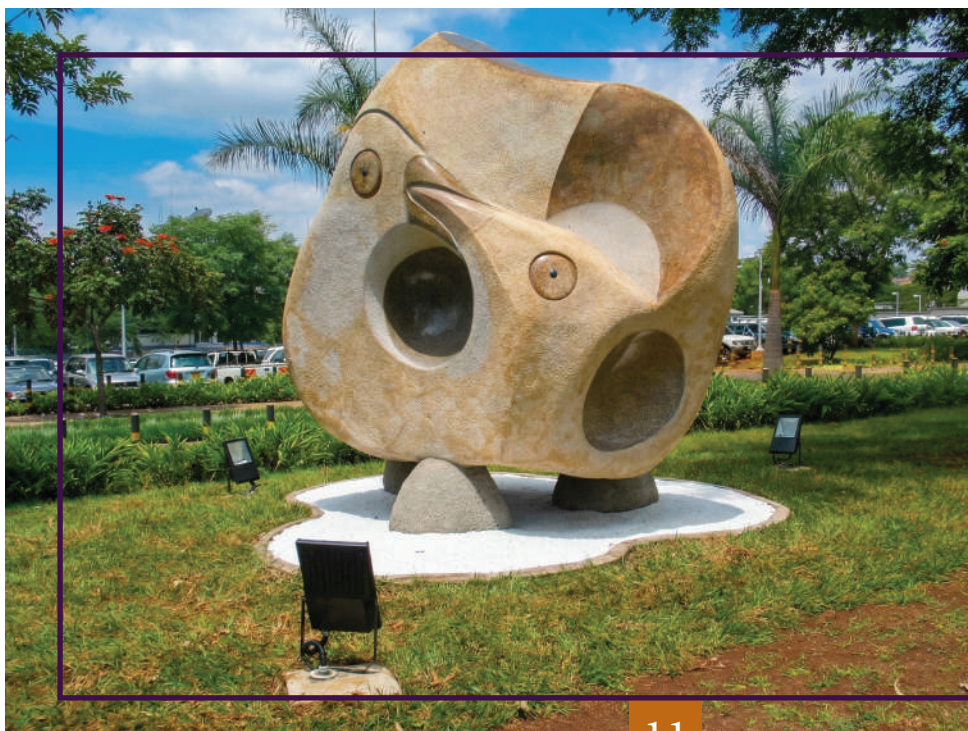
Trained as a primary school teacher (PI) at Eregi Teacher's College, Motondi would encounter Ong'esa in a formal environment when he studied as a private candidate for his diploma at Kisii College in 1988 pursuing Art, Kiswahili and Religion as his core subjects. Elkana Ong'esa was then the head of the Department of Art at Kisii College.

Motondi would become a teacher (now retired), lecturer, trainer and co-author of a textbook for Grade 5 learners of Art. He embraced learning in different dimensions whether through experientially from his many forays abroad or pedagogically where he applied himself to formal learning. He is currently working on his doctorate in sculpture from Kenyatta University where he also received his Master of Arts degree.

As a protégé, Motondi has been a part of the production of many of the late Ong'esa's sculptures, supporting him as an apprentice at a younger age and later as an assistant on larger projects. This includes *Her Mother* (2006), a life-sized artwork illustrating the bond between a mother and her baby which is hosted in Changchung City, China. He also worked with Ong'esa on *Dancing Birds*, commissioned by Micheal Ranneberger, then United States Ambassador to Kenya in 2007- 2008 in the aftermath of the post-election violence. When Ong'esa was invited to China in 2006 to install his work, he was requested to identify a Kenyan artist who could compete in one of their projects. He recommended Motondi , and thus gave him the opportunity to make his maiden visit out of Kenya. His hosts were impressed at the quality of his work and invited him back the following year.

At most Olympics, a cultural Olympiad is held alongside the games to facilitate international artistic exchange among artists as the games go on. In 2008, Motondi represented Kenya at the Beijing Olympics, facilitated by Kenya's Department of Culture. Here, Motondi won a gold medal for *Inseparable*, his 1.5m sculpture depicting intertwined fish, bringing immediate recognition to himself and his country. He also brought back the Olympic torch award to Kenya.

Following this, Motondi was invited to various countries including Russia, Canada, South Korea and back to China. His works are installed in each of these countries in specific cities - Penza, Alberta, Boryeong, and Chansha Hunan respectively.



*Dancing Birds at
USA Embassy, Nairobi*

In terms of form and aesthetic, both artists borrow from nature and nurture, combining natural and abstract forms in their finished pieces. For Elkana, it was the birds and the social symbols like a mother and child which Motondi would later depict in his 2013 sculpture

Love for the Nation located at Uhuru Gardens which celebrates a mother's love and care. Leonardo da Vinci is famously quoted for saying, 'poor is the pupil who does not surpass his master' and Motondi has gone on to prove this adage true. While Elkana's artworks can be found in numerous public spaces around the country including the National Museums of Kenya, Uhuru Gardens and within the UN Embassy in Nairobi, and at the Coca-Cola headquarters in Atlanta, UNESCO (Paris) and the United Nations (New York), Motondi's works on public display include the sculptures of Dedan Waciuri Kimathi and Mekatilili wa Menza at the Heroes Museum located at Uhuru Gardens. His first public work included the creation of the monument located at English Point, Marina. He has also carved out the statue of Masinde Muliro which sits in Kitale town, paying homage to this historical father. In September 2025, Motondi celebrated the unveiling of Mugumo Tree, which stands as a signature piece for Tatu City.

Motondi has twice been decorated by the State; he has received the Head of State Commendation (2011 and 2023) for his contributions to art in the country. He has also been recognized by UNESCO for his contribution in immortalizing heritage through sculptural art in 2022 on the occasion of World Teachers Day.

In comparison, (and cognizant that Elkana may not have been adequately recognized by the State in his lifetime as a trailblazer), he was, however, the recipient of many accolades including a lifetime achievement award presented by Kraft Africa in 2015.

What is certain is that both agree(d) that there needs to be better recognition of artists and their works, proper infrastructure to support them, museums to keep their work in, and proper remuneration. Elkana's gathering of global artists for the first African Stones Talk symposium in Tabaka in 2012 bears testimony to his commitment to bringing practitioners together³. These symposia continue to be a traditional gathering of sculptors annually.

Motondi's works can be seen as a continuation and expansion of the man he learned from, and worked so closely with, both in aesthetics and technical mastery. Their artistry demonstrates how artistic lineage can work in practice, not by mere imitation but by adaptation, reinterpretation and also, challenge.

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³Elkana Omweri Ong'esa- He carved Stones into Stories in <https://artenefits.com/elkana-omweri-ongesa-1944-present/>

A Case for the Establishment of a Visual Arts Management Organization in honour of Elkana Omweri Ong'esa

Faith Amatika-Omondi

Introduction

Visual arts, as the name suggests, are works of copyright that appeal to the visuals. In contradistinction to performing arts, they are complete prior to an audience encountering them whereas performing arts must be performed before an audience.⁴ Visual arts include paintings, drawings, sculptures, etc. and are also known as artistic works.⁵ These are the works that the late Elkana Omweri Ong'esa specialized in during his lifetime. He was a renowned sculptor who converted Kisii soapstone into beautiful masterpieces such as *Enyamuchera* (Bird of Peace). Such masterpieces have travelled to extreme places of this globe courtesy of sales, resales and further sales. The resales and further sales have fetched bags of money for the art dealers but sadly, Mr. Ong'esa seems to have only made money from the first sale and not subsequent resales to the best of our knowledge.

While the protection of copyright works is straightforward in that works are not subjected to any formality checks⁶, the administration of copyright (royalties) in such works can be complicated. The complication is compounded by the fact that it is not easy to monitor the use of one's copyright works and hence not possible to negotiate license terms with every user. It is for this reason that Collective Management Organizations (CMOs) come into play.

Collective management of copyright in Kenya

In Kenya, the Copyright Act provides for the establishment of CMOs which are private companies limited by guarantee and incorporated under the Companies Act 2015. The licensing and supervision of the activities of CMOs is done by the Kenya Copyright Board (KECOBO).⁷ To this end, KECOBO cannot license a body as a CMO in respect of works already being administered by another CMO⁸. This means that if for instance CMO 'X' administers copyright in literary works, CMO 'Y' cannot be licensed to administer copyright in the same works.

The collective administration of copyright in visual arts has hitherto not been actively pursued in Kenya. This is evidenced by the historical development of the CMO industry which can be traced back to 1983 when the Music Copyright Society of Kenya was registered.⁹ The CMO administers the rights of musicians i.e., composers, publishers, and arrangers of music. In 2003, the Kenya Association of Music Producers was formed with the mandate of administering the rights of producers of sound recordings and audiovisual works¹⁰ and the

⁴Mary Elizabeth, 'What is a Visual Artist' (2 March 2024) <<https://www.practicaladultinsights.com/what-is-a-visual-artist.htm>> accessed 10 January 2026.

⁵Section 2 Copyright Act No. 12 of 2001.

⁶The only requirement for copyright protection is that the work must be original i.e., not copied and that it must be fixed in a tangible format. See section 22 (5) of the Act.

⁷Section 46-48 of the Copyright Act as well as the Copyright (Collective Management) Regulations 2020.

⁸Section 46(5) of the Act.

⁹Music Copyright Society of Kenya <<https://mcsk.org/about>> accessed 10 January 2026.

¹⁰Kenya Association of Music Producers <<https://www.kamp.or.ke/index.php/en/about-kamp>> accessed 10 January 2026.

Performers' Rights Society of Kenya (PRISK) was incorporated in 2009 to administer the rights of performers. As of 2024, these were the active CMOs in Kenya as the Reproduction Rights Society of Kenya commonly known as KOPIKEN has not been active in the recent years. KOPIKEN was incorporated in 2005 with the mandate of administering copyright for authors and publishers of literary works. Additionally, in 2017, the Music Publishers Association of Kenya (MPAKE) was licensed in place of MCSK, but the license was withdrawn only a year after due to its inability to effectively administer copyright. In 2025, the Kenya Copyright Board licensed PAVRISK, a multipurpose CMO to manage and administer rights of all rights holders for general use while KAMP was licensed to administer all rights in new media. According to the website of PAVRISK, it 'has also been allowed to administer on appointment basis, all the economic rights in relation to the works of reprography in Kenya (book publishers) and the rights administration in the visual arts category.'¹¹

Visual arts

It can therefore be seen that among all CMOs that operate or have operated in Kenya, none has ever been formed with the sole mandate of administering copyright in artistic works or visual arts, save for the portrayal by PAVISK as being mandated to administer the right. This is, however, not the case as there are no regulations or guidelines on the administration of visual arts by PAVRISK or any other CMO. In the past, KOPIKEN, as a reprography CMO or Reproduction Rights Organization (RRO) had the mandate of administering the rights of visual artists when their works are reproduced in books or other materials.

The 2019 amendment of the Copyright Act introduced a provision on the Artist Resale Right¹² and further states that visual artists can form a CMO to administer the right¹³ and that in the absence of a germane CMO, the Attorney General may designate a CMO to perform the function. The board (KECOBO) may also assist in setting up a CMO for any class of copyright owners including visual artists. The question that begs then is, why hasn't the Attorney General designated any CMO to administer the artist resale right or why hasn't KECOBO done anything to help establish the relevant CMO?

Basis of the Artist Resale Right (*droit de suite*)

The Artist Resale Right (ARR) has its origin in 20th century Civil Law France when it became clear that the author's rights (*droit d'auteur*) system was not adequate to sufficiently reward visual artists for their creations.¹⁴ Prior to 1920, there arose a public outcry due to the poverty in which visual artists and their heirs languished in poverty after the first sale of their artwork. Once the works were sold, the artists had no part in the subsequent resales while art collectors reaped lots of money from resales. Visual artists lacked the benefit of what other copyright work creators e.g., publishers and musicians had in reproduction and performance, respectively.¹⁵

As indicated, the ARR originated in Civil Law France where the emphasis is on protecting the author as opposed to the work, which is emphasized in Common Law Legal Systems.¹⁶ As such, the ARR had a welfare component to it. After much push and pull between Common Law and Civil Law jurisdictions, the former, perceiving it as a form of tax which was punitive to purchasers, while the latter viewed it as a necessary welfare safety net, it was adopted in the EU as a directive¹⁷. The same is also provided for in the Berne Convention¹⁸. Today, the ARR finds itself in several Common Law

¹¹PAVRISK Licensing < <https://pavrisk.or.ke/licensing/> > accessed 10 January 2026

¹²Section 26 D

¹³Section 26 D (3)

¹⁴Anthony O'Dwyer, 'The Artists' Resale Right: "The Greatest Good"?', (2016) 3 Edinburgh Student L. Rev. 129

¹⁵Ibid 131

¹⁶Colin Manning, 'English & continental tests of originality: Labour, skill, and judgement versus creations of the mind' (2016) Cork Institute of Technology, < <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2782052> > accessed 10 January 2026.

¹⁷Directive 2001/84/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 September 2001 on the Resale Right for the benefit of the author of an original work of art (EU) <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32001L0084&from=EN>> accessed 10 January, 2026, (hereinafter Artist Resale Right Directive)

¹⁸Article 14^{ter} Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic works (Berne) September 9, 1886 (as amended on September 28, 1979) < <https://wipolex.wipo.int/en/treaties/textdetails/12214> > accessed 10 January 2026 (entered into force November 19, 1984) (hereinafter Berne Convention).

legislations, Kenya included, yet its justification is not copyright protection for artists, rather a welfare justification which was never inculcated in the rights holders, users, policy makers, legislators and other stakeholders.

The imposition of the ARR in legislation as copyright has created a misplaced justification for copyright. The aim of copyright is not to create a welfare system for wealth redistribution, rather to reward successful creators of copyright works.¹⁹ However, in the EU, Germany and Norway¹⁰ have, based on the EU Artist Resale Right Directive, drafted laws and policies that have enabled them to merge the Intellectual Property Right (IPR) with the social welfare aspect of the resale right.

The Artists Resale Right in Africa

According to the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers (CISAC), as of 2014, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Morocco, Mali, and Ivory Coast were the only African countries with legislation on the Artists Resale Right.²¹ Kenya has since joined the list by virtue of the 2019 Copyright (Amendment) Act which introduced the right.²² A comparison of the Kenyan provisions on the Artists Resale Right and the Burkina Faso provisions²³ reveal a gap in the Kenyan Law. While the Burkina Faso Law clearly obligates the officer through whom the sale is conducted to notify the author or respective CMO of the sale, deduct the prescribed amount and remit it to the CMO, the Kenyan Law lacks that provision. Such notification should be done within three days of the sale.²⁴

The Kenyan Act is however silent on how the resale royalty is to be administered. Section 26D states that in the absence of a CMO to manage this right, the Attorney General shall designate any of the existing CMOs to administer it. It then prescribes the rate in percentage of the selling price that is payable as the resale royalty. Two major gaps can be seen here:

- a) Whose responsibility is it to notify the Attorney General to designate any of the CMOs to administer the ARR? How is the AG expected to know that the need to do so exists? A motion must first be moved and this ought to come from the visual artists, probably through KECOBO. The Attorney General cannot act *suo moto*.
- b) How is the rate of 5% of the selling price to be enforced? In contrast to the Burkina Faso law, the Kenyan Act is silent on how the CMO is to administer the right. Subsection 4 of Section 26D of the Act states that:

The resale royalty shall be payable at the rate of five percent of the net sale price on the commercial resale of an artwork and the seller, the art market professional, the seller's agent and the buyer shall be jointly and severally liable to pay the resale royalty.

It does not stipulate at which stage the CMO gets involved neither does it state who holds the seller, art market professional, buyer and seller's agent to account in the transaction. The Copyright (Collective Management Organizations) Regulations 2020 are also silent on the same.

¹⁹O'Dwyer (n 11) 134

²⁰*ibid* 135

²¹CISAC - EVA - GESAC – Artists' Resale Right – 2014 <<https://www.cisac.org/services/policy/visual-artists-resale-right>> accessed 10 January 2026

²²See (n 9)

²³Article 18 and 19 of the Law No. 032-99/AN on the Protection of Literary and Artistic Property (English version), <<https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text/490983>> accessed 10 January 2026.

²⁴Article 19

The difference in the provisions found in the Burkina Faso law and the Kenyan law can be attributed to the legal systems obtained in the two jurisdictions. As a former French colony, Burkina Faso has incorporated provisions that make it possible for the right to be administered for the benefit of artists in a welfare-like arrangement. It is highly likely that the drafters of the Burkina Faso law, were influenced by the French law on the ARR. The case in Kenya is however different because of its common law background. As such, it lacks sufficient details on how the right is to be administered. It was necessary to understand what initially informed the incorporation of the ARR in the civil law jurisdictions before introducing it to the Kenyan system.

Conclusion

It therefore follows that even with the introduction of the ARR in Kenya, its administration and enforceability may not be possible with the law as it is. The first step would be for all visual artists to unite and form an association. This already exists by virtue of several Visual Artists Associations for instance the Kuona Trust,²⁵ a Centre dedicated to the generation, presentation and promotion of innovative contemporary visual arts practice in Kenya as well as the Kenya National Visual Artists Association (KNVAA)²⁶ which is an association uniting all visual artists with offices in all 47 counties. With the enactment of the ARR, it is imperative that proactive steps are taken to provide both legal and policy frameworks for the proper administration of the right. Visual Artists ought to speak with one voice too and lobby for the proper administration of this right.

Additionally, with the incorporation of the provision in the Act, a further amendment may be necessary to put in place more information. Regulations must be made to also give effect to some of the provisions for instance, what would inform the AG to designate a CMO to administer the right? There ought to be some regulations on how KECOBO should go about helping to establish a CMO. It must be understood that KECOBO is a government entity mandated to administer and enforce all matters of copyright, but it is not mandated to help collect royalties which is a private responsibility of copyright holders. Its responsibility on royalties is limited to managing and supervising CMOs. It may therefore be difficult for KECOBO to help establish a CMO which it would have a responsibility to supervise without raising serious conflict of interest questions.

Lastly, awareness creation and capacity building ought to be conducted for all relevant stakeholders (rights holders, users, policy makers, legislators, etc.) for the proper understanding of the essence of the Artists Resale Right to enhance its administration. If this is properly done, Visual Artists, for instance the late Mr. Elkana Omweri Ong'esa and their estates, shall benefit from their creations just like other copyright holders who reap billions of dollars generations after the creation of the work.

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²⁵Kuona Trust < <https://kuonatrust.org/who-we-are/what-we-do/> > accessed 10 January 2026

²⁶ArtLawKenya < <https://artlawkenya.wordpress.com/author/artlawkenya/page/2/> > accessed 10 January 2026

Professor Elkana Omweri Ong'esa — A Distinguished Artist-in-Residence at Lingnan University, Hong Kong

Mette Hjort

Professor Elkana Omweri Ong'esa was the Lingnan University artist-in-residence in the Spring of 2011, at a time when I was the Head of Visual Studies at Lingnan. During his Lingnan residency Elkana touched the lives of many people, young and old, and made a significant contribution, not only to the liberal arts university in question, but also to Hong Kong. In evoking this contribution here, I hope to honor Elkana's life by articulating what this remarkable son of Kenya meant, and continues to mean, to Hong Kong. To do this, I must first establish the context for his residency in 2011, a residency that is proudly remembered by Lingnan University. The catalogue for his "Fourth Dimension" exhibition at the university is readily available through Digital Commons@Lingnan (Ong'esa 2011).

In 2005, Professor Edward Chen, then-president of Lingnan University, sought to support the aspirations of the newly established Bachelor's (Hons) in Visual Studies by securing the funds and infrastructure needed for the creation of an artist-in-residence programme. Generously funded by the Lingnan Foundation, which at that time was based at Yale University, the artist-in-residence programme was launched in 2006 with a residency by the award-winning Hong Kong artist Lam Tung-pang.

The Visual Studies programme at Lingnan University would soon become a stand-alone department dedicated to nurturing students' capacities for empathy, curiosity, cross-cultural understanding, and resilience. Especially important was the department's aspiration—through an interdisciplinary course of study emphasizing art history, philosophical aesthetics, film and media studies, and community-oriented, practice-based studio courses—to create the conditions in which Hong Kong students could develop a well-articulated awareness of the power of artists and their artistic practices to contribute to the crafting of good societies. Dignity, respect, meaning, purpose, and a strong sense of active hope, we believed, are constitutive of such societies.

The creation of the Visual Studies programme in 2005, authorized by the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong (which oversees and funds all the government-funded universities), was itself linked to a decision, after the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, to ensure that Hong Kong would be more than a leading financial centre in the future, and would be a place where art is deeply embedded in the city's DNA. This vision was very much about human flourishing, and ideas for the West Kowloon Cultural District were an integral part of it. Architectural plans began to be commissioned and developed during the early 2000s; and now, two decades later, Hong Kong's landscape is definitively changed by the presence of a suite of institutions devoted to art: M+ (Asia's global museum of contemporary visual culture, the Xiqu Centre (specializing in traditional Chinese opera), and the Tai Kwun Centre for Heritage and Arts, among many others (and with many more envisaged). Visual Studies at Lingnan University, and the artist-in-residence programme, are part of this story of Hong Kong's reinvention. Indeed, the government's rationale for creating a Visual Studies programme at Lingnan University was driven by the clear need for talent development related to the creative arts, given the guiding ideas for Hong Kong's development in the post-Handover era.

The selection of artists for the 4-month residency at Lingnan was guided by a number of criteria: a) techniques: the artists' track records had to demonstrate a compelling ability



From the “Fourth Dimension” exhibition catalogue (Ong’esa 2011)

to work with demanding artistic *techniques*—that is, we were looking for people who anchored their artistic expression in a skills-based approach to art; b) *creativity under constraint*: the artists’ proposed projects for the residency had to evidence a capacity to be creative in the context of various constraints (a limited budget, a modest studio, etc.); c) *community engagement*: the artists’ oeuvre and proposed residency project needed to demonstrate a genuine commitment to reaching out to broad-based communities, rather than a desire to produce work for elites with highly selective tastes. In addition to these criteria, we worked with a distinction between emerging and established artists, and with the concept of local and non-local artists. Our commitment was to bring one local and one non-local artist to Hong Kong every year, and one emerging and one established artist. During their time at Lingnan University, the artists would teach one studio course of their choosing in the multi-purpose studio that Lam Tung-pang designed for us in 2005. Living on campus, they were to become part of a living-learning community. The artists’ work and that of their students was to be celebrated in an on-campus exhibition, either in the multi-purpose studio or in the university’s art gallery (the Leung Fan Oi Wan Gallery). A professionally produced catalogue would accompany each exhibition.

It will surprise nobody to read that Elkana was one of our non-local, established artists. We were simply delighted when he agreed to join us, after we reached out to him through a network of Kenyan artists. In addition to the sheer beauty and communicative power of his internationally acclaimed works, such as *Enyamuchera* (*Bird of Peace*, 1978) and *Dancing Birds* (2010), we were deeply impressed by the ways in which his curiosity about artistic carving practices had led him to seek out collaboration with Inuit carvers, among many others in the global community of sculptors. His commitment to skills development and community building in the Kenyan town of Kisii, where his talent and success have provided a crucial stepping stone for countless others, and for future generations, was inspiring. His advocacy, at the highest level (e.g. the United Nations), on behalf of Kenyan soapstone and the Kenyan stone carvers of Kisii was ingenious and courageous and exactly the kind of thing that we wanted to encourage our students and the Hong Kong community to think about. His articulate, nuanced, and unwavering critique of some of the established distinctions of the art world—those drawing a stark line, for example, between cheap curio art and expensive ‘real’ art—offered a vision for a much fairer world. For all these and many other reasons, Elkana was the non-local artist we most wanted to bring to Hong Kong in 2011. Thankfully, he graciously accepted our invitation.

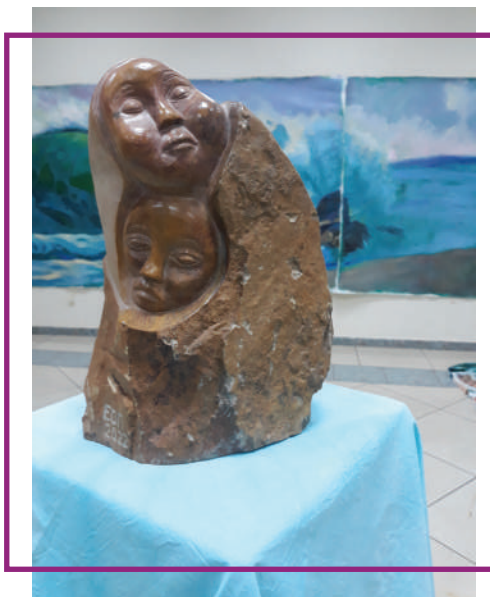
During his time with us Elkana was a constant source of inspiration. Colleagues from across the university sought him out and befriended him through wide-ranging conversations about his work. Members of the wider Hong Kong community found unexpected synergies between his work and theirs. I remember with great fondness a conversation between Elkana and a Hong Kong businessman with a ceramics factory on the Chinese Mainland—the businessman was fascinated by how Elkana’s soapstone carvings, and those of the Kisii carvers, produced large mounds of stone chips. Thinking about the by-products of ceramics production, he asked about the fate of Elkana’s artistic by-products. Perhaps, he said, they could brainstorm together about possible uses. Theirs was a long and detailed exchange in the context of the “Fourth Dimension” exhibition. Witnessing it, I saw an influential Hong Konger with strong ties to the city’s entrepreneurial cross-border (Hong Kong/Mainland China) business community embrace Elkana’s work and vision. For our students, Elkana’s presence in Hong Kong and at Lingnan, for many months, was quite simply life-changing in lots of ways. Warm, kind, dignified, thoughtful, and always purposeful on behalf of life, human community, and art, Elkana was truly a wise and worldly Kenyan elder in our midst. We in Hong Kong will always be deeply grateful for the many gifts he gave us. And he in turn will always be part of the story of Hong Kong’s strong embrace of art in the post-Handover era.

May Elkana Omweri Ong’esa always rest in peace.

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Mother & Child

“Tell Me, What Do You See?” - Elkana Omweri Ong’esa

David Omingo Oendo

“Tell me what you see,” the ever present prodding question or response from Elkana Omweri Ong’esa each time someone asked him to explain a piece of art work. Like in a poem, a poet pens lines with or without specific literary skills, the meaning in each stanza lies in the experiences and world view of the reader. Ong’esa applied this approach to art appreciation to a significant effect. Little wonder. “The African Stones Talk (AST)” symposium, an annual event founded by Mzee Ong’esa in 2011, was a reflection of what personal meaning each artwork conveyed.

Mr. Ong’esa viewed everybody as an artist, be it in drawing, modelling, or carving, yet also in art appreciation. From birds, animals, human faces, and human figures to abstract art, he sought to use art as a medium to address pertinent issues. He was a champion of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs). Through lobbying and advocacy, he made a remarkable impact on policy in sectors of education, health, fair trade, environmental conservation labour, and poverty reduction.

Visitors to the ELKOM Museum - Art Center will have to, personally answer this question, “WHAT DO YOU SEE?”

David Omingo Oendo is Acting CEO, ELKOM Museum



Amb Robert F. Godec at US Embassy

Panga Sanaa: Policy Brief

Billy Mutu

Submitted by Billy Mutu on Behalf of the Kenya National Visual Artists Association

This Policy Brief has been prepared by practitioners in visual arts in Kenya. The objective is to call on county governments to organize coordinated annual art fairs. The impression of organizing art fairs around the country stemmed from the Kenya National Visual Artists Association's strategic planning meeting of 2020. The overall idea was to enhance and nurture creativity in Kenya by organizing major artistic events such as art fairs, to inspire, nurture and spur artistic growth among young and upcoming visual arts talents in Kenya from the counties to national levels. It was during the 2024 Panga Sanaa Fellowship that the idea morphed into a policy brief after a meeting between representatives from artist groups, law makers and other stakeholders within the visual arts sector in Kenya.

Policy Action: County governments should develop a policy framework for funding, organizing, managing and holding coordinated Annual Visual Art Fairs

Background

Visual art as practiced by creators of fine art, rock paintings, photography, sculptures, jewelry, ornaments, ceramics, woodcarvings, pottery, hand textiles and woven products, basketry products, bead work, body art, graffiti, household and batiks, among others is essential in the country as it constitutes part of its cultural heritage as set out in Section 2 of the *National Heritage and Museums Act, No. 6 of 2006*. Indeed, under Article 11 (1) of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) these cultural activities constitute the foundation of the nation and the cumulative civilization of the Kenyan people and nation.

Generally, over the last decade, Kenya's creative economy has grown in importance, driven by youth demographics, urbanisation, tourism and digital platforms. However, *visual artists remain under-supported* compared to other creative sub-sectors such as music and performing arts. Under Article 11 of the Constitution, both the National and County governments are mandated with promoting all forms of national and cultural activities as expressed through literature, the arts, traditional celebrations, science, communication, information, mass media, publications, libraries and other forms of cultural heritage.

Several counties have spearheaded these activities; the Luo Cultural Festival in Kisumu, Lamu Cultural Festival, Lake Turkana Cultural Festival, Maragoli Cultural Festival in Busia County, and the Lake Nakuru Cultural Festival. In these cultural festivals, the performing arts take prominence while visual art is *often marginalized* and treated as a side attraction. This category has not been targeted effectively despite its presence across the various sub-sectors of the creative sector.

Over time, history has shown that the various art forms reflect a community's way of life, identity, values and norms and bring out the beauty in a society. Visual art is educative, decorative and inspirational and allows consumers of art to gain insight into history created through the visual record of life experiences. In addition, visual art plays an important role in fostering cultural identities, cultural dialogue and sharing of ideas, styles and practices. Therefore if County Governments *institutionalize, fund and sustainably manage coordinated Annual Visual Arts Fairs*, they can act as engines for cultural expression and dialogue, youth employment, creative enterprise development and local revenue generation.

Currently, visual art creators in Kenya largely exhibit in commercial galleries such as One Off Contemporary Art Gallery, Matbronze Wildlife Art Gallery and Foundry, Circle Art Gallery, and Diani Beach Art Gallery. These galleries are created through the efforts of individuals and are generally viewed as targeting foreigners and the local elite, therefore, mostly inaccessible to the general public. Furthermore, due to their nature, local artists are dissatisfied with the remuneration system which is skewed against them considering the growing number of artists.

This gap presents a clear opportunity for County Governments to; democratise access to visual art, create structured markets for artists, integrate visual arts into county economic planning and strengthen local creative value chains. The Council of Governors (CoG) has an opportunity to remedy this situation because implementation of arts and culture is a devolved function. County Governments, working through the CoG, should adopt a *policy and implementation framework* for funding, organizing, managing and coordinating *Annual County Visual Arts Fairs*, aligned to County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) and national cultural and creative economy priorities. Currently, counties do not have adequate public exhibition spaces for visual artists and this can be remedied through an art fair incorporated in cultural festivals.

ANNUAL ART FAIRS

What is an art fair?

An art fair is a *time-bound, curated and market-oriented exhibition platform* where artists, collectives, galleries, curators, and art institutions showcase and sell artwork to the public, collectors, tourists, public institutions and corporate buyers. Modern art fairs increasingly combine; physical exhibitions and sales, artist talks and live demonstrations, workshops, mentorship clinics, digital showcases and online sales platforms. Typical fairs run for three (3) to seven (7) days and are hosted in accessible public venues such as parks, stadia, cultural centres, universities, and town halls.



Artist and Mentee

Culture is a Function of County Governments

A County Integrated Development Plan is a detailed plan for the counties that gives an overall framework for development. It aims to co-ordinate the work of both levels of government in a coherent manner to improve the quality of life for all the people and contribute towards devolution. Under Section 104 (1) of the County Government Act, a county government should plan for the county. Moreover, and most importantly, no public funds can be appropriated outside a plan set out for the county.

In Section 5 of the County Governments Act, Counties are mandated with undertaking functions provided for in Article 186 and assigned in the Fourth Schedule of the Constitution of Kenya. These include the mandate to manage; cultural activities, public entertainment and community amenities. Art as a cultural expression is therefore a devolved function and the various aspects of visual arts ought to find a place within county plans and budgets. Therefore, by including visual art fairs in the CIDP, counties can assign budgets and ensure that the events are implemented as planned.

Why counties should plan and coordinate art fairs

- i. Art fairs bring together collectors, aspiring artists, curators, contemporary art critics, gallerists, and art historians. The platform enables artists to build networks and learn key features of curating and how to showcase their art for sale.
- ii. Kenyan artists have limited opportunities to participate in art fairs. By including art fairs in county government planning, artists will not only get publicity but also an opportunity to sell their products to local and international participants.
- iii. The art fairs can be organized alongside other key county activities for sustainability and prudent use of resources.
- iv. Participants in art fairs get an opportunity to see established and upcoming artists' work.

In a nutshell, art fairs provide connection, inspiration, exposure, community participation and feedback on art. They are necessary for visual arts in Kenya to thrive.

How art fairs can be implemented

- I. A county government can enter into partnerships with any public or private organization to support holding the art fair and thus reduce costs and improve access to such events. To maintain this objective, fairs should prioritise the use of public spaces such as public parks and other open spaces, county cultural centres and museums, stadia and civic halls, including educational institutions during holiday periods. Incremental investment can later upgrade these spaces into permanent creative hubs.
- II. A county government can develop and implement a CIDP that incorporates art fairs as a specific item in their priority cultural activities.
- III. Working with Council of Governors, a county government can ensure that the art fairs are well coordinated so that they are not scheduled to compete with other key activities
- IV. A county government should include artists at all stages of planning and implementation of such events

Involvement of the Council of Governors

The Council of County Governors (COG) is a non-partisan organization established under Section 19 of the Intergovernmental Relations Act (IGRA 2012). The Council of Governors comprises the Governors of the forty-seven (7) Counties. Its main functions are the promotion of visionary leadership; sharing of best practices and; offering a collective voice on policy issues; promoting inter – county consultations; encouraging and initiating information sharing on the performance of County Governments with regard to the execution of their functions; and enabling collective consultation on matters of interest to County Governments.

Subject to Section 20(3) of the Inter-Governmental Relations Act 2012, the Council of Governors has established sectorial working or committees to better carry out its functions. The COG therefore operates through committees that mirror those of the Senate and the National Assembly. Currently there are 18 technical committees chaired by the Governors. The Operations of Committees are governed by Committee Rules & Regulations. One such committee is the Youth, Sports, Gender and Culture Gender Committee which serves as a vital platform for growth and development of visual arts in Kenya.

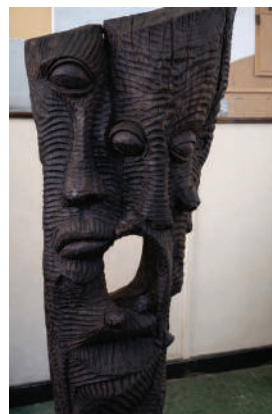
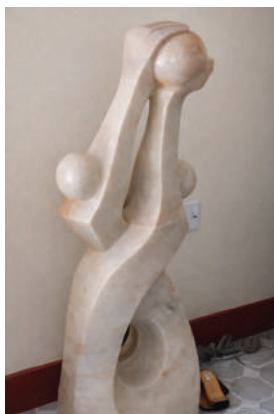
To facilitate the introduction of art fairs, this committee should; *develop national guidelines* for county art fairs, coordinate annual calendars to avoid clashes between key activities, facilitate inter-county exchange programmes and champion shared branding such as a “*Kenya Visual Arts Fair Circuit*”. This coordination enhances visibility, efficiency, and investor confidence.

Policy Recommendations

- (i) The county government(s) should incorporate visual art fairs in their existing and planned annual cultural festival. There already exist cultural festivals such as the Luo Cultural Festival, Lamu Cultural Festival, Lake Turkana Cultural Festival, Maragoli Cultural Festival and Lake Nakuru Cultural Festival. These festivals can incorporate an art fair as a strategic component.
- (ii) The county government(s) should leverage the already existing public spaces to exhibit the works of local artists to promote their visibility and sales.
- (iii) The county government(s) could partner with art associations to plan, organize and manage the visual art fairs.
- (iv) The county government(s) could collaborate with educational and training institutions to make annual visual art fairs become a platform to promote art education through workshops facilitated by local artists.

Note: This Policy Brief was edited for publication in the Jahazi Journal

Billy Mutu is Secretary of the Kenya National Visual Artists Association



Egware: The Museum paying homage to the Kisii soapstone in Nairobi

Anne Mucheke

Tucked within the maze that is the Sarit Centre in the Westlands district of Nairobi County sits a small, striking museum dedicated to Kisii cultural heritage.

Egware Museum is the brainchild of Momayi Mogusu, a young Kisii entrepreneur whose business centers on crafts made from soapstone. Opened on 10th December 2025, the museum is his legacy project to give back to the community that produces the beautiful artefacts and souvenirs that he sells. It is also his way of giving agency and dignity to the craft and its makers.

Egware joins a handful of Kenya's private museum collections including the Murumbi African Heritage Collection situated at the Nairobi Gallery, the Treasures of Africa Museum in Kitale and the Thunguma Museum in Nyeri.

Like any well curated museum, Egware demonstrates significant knowledge of its subject, communicates visual appeal and immerses the visitor into the displays on its shelves. The exhibition unfolds in four stages; first is the interaction with information about the natural rock from Tabaka, detailing its composition, colours and evolution. Second is homage to the craft, a discussion about the traditional tools used by the carvers. This leads to the third phase, the heart of the collection, the beautiful pieces from the master sculptors and carvers of Bomware village in Kisii county. The collection reflects knowledge passed down through generations, comprising a rich artistic lineage.



Elkana passing on tools to the next generation

A broad lens is applied to the fourth and final section covering the men and women sculptors, quarry sites and the carving and transport ecosystem. This is the often-unseen foundation of Mogusu's soapstone business; the people working quietly behind the scenes. A video complements the statistics as the display ends with a show of souvenir pieces.

In establishing this museum, Mogusu defied cultural expectations and bureaucratic barriers. He overlooked asking for permission from his community and village elders as well as permission from the political leadership. His defiance has opened up space for the current generation that has little respect for traditional authority.

"Without action, Kisii soapstone craftsmanship is vanishing," says Mogusu. Having worked with the entire ecosystem in Kisii, he noticed that youngsters, like himself, have lost interest in learning how to make artefacts from soapstone.

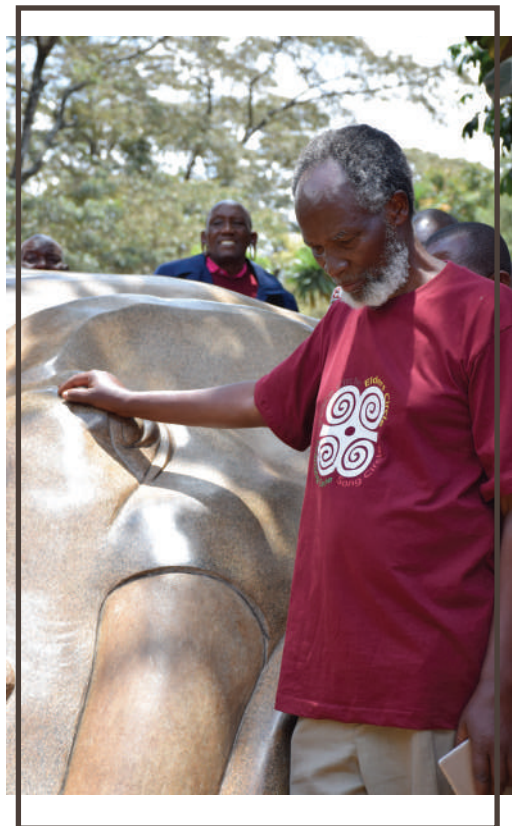
"They have seen their parents devote entire years to the craft and the most it did was take them to school," notes Mogusu. The apprenticeship that created generations of Kisii soap stone sculptors is dying. Mogusu realized he needed to do something about it. Egware is his response. The museum was funded from client sales and support following rejection from the official cultural administration that he approached. The museum stands as proof that participation and visibility can serve artist ideas where official support is wanting.

Citation: Interview with Momanyi Mogusu at the Egware Museum, Sarit Centre on 8th January 2026.

Anne Mucheke is a freelance journalist and communications professional based in Nairobi. She also works with Santuri Media, an editorial consulting outfit which nurtures cultural memory projects.



Mother and Child



Remembering Elkana Ong'esa

Suzanne Mieko

On Thursday 28th November 2024, my family and I were on our way to visit our dear friend, Elkana Ong'esa in Kisii. It was his 80th birthday and we were excited to see him and celebrate him. The sun was just starting to come up when my phone rang and I received the news that Elkana had passed away that morning. We continued on to Kisii and Tabaka for a very different visit but one that was no less meaningful and special.

I met Elkana in 2015 when I joined the Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH). At this point, he and the TICAH founder, Mary Ann Burris, had been friends for a decade already and they were close. Elkana and I quickly became friends. He was quick-witted, hilarious and had such a beautifully creative and poetic mind. He was open and friendly and a fantastic teacher. I learned a lot about listening to stones, working with stones and how nature and art practices blend so seamlessly together.

Elkana was an incredible sculptor and a Kenyan artistic pioneer. His work can be found around the world, in France, New York, China, Nairobi, Kisii and Tabaka, in museums and parks, corporate headquarters and international offices, in hotels and little apartments, like mine. He loved sculpting birds and all things of the natural world. He loved sharing his gift and teaching countless others through apprenticeship, mentorship and also through his *African Stone Talks Symposium*, an international stone sculpting gathering, held in Kisii. He will always be a Kenyan hero in the arts.

During my family's visit to Kisii, Elkana was everywhere - in the beautiful sunset, the weather, his family, his life's work, the birds in the air, the flowers all around, in his notebooks and the soapstone quarries... in the air and the sun. I took a moment with one of his sculptures and thanked him for being my friend and for teaching me so much. That night, we celebrated his birthday and his life with cake and reflection.

Since his passing, I've been thinking through our time together, the conversations and laughs that we shared over the years, the projects and plans. I've included writings from a few of these projects below. I'm so proud of the work we did together and am forever grateful for the friendship we had. I hope these snippets are as inspiring and interesting to you as they are to me.

Conversations with Stone: A Story narrated by Elkana (2022)

In the Kisii community, there are many songs and stories where you say something and the reply comes back to you through the stones. It is echoed back to you but sometimes from people from far away; it comes back different. There are also rituals and ceremonies that are directed by stones - when to do initiations or when to plant or harvest.

For me, as a sculptor, the communication process starts from the first interaction with a stone. First, you must ask the stone to work with it. If they agree then you can begin to understand the stone's color, texture, and strength. It will soon tell you what it's willing to be.



Elkana at a workshop

Sometimes, my ideas come forward and sometimes it comes from them. The rhythm of the tools working with a stone becomes part of the communication, becoming a chant, a song, a poem, a vibration, a story that continues long after the piece is done.

These conversations must be private. I remember a long time ago I was working on a piece when an Elder came by and told me I shouldn't be working around so many prying eyes. I thought, "Meh, I'm a Christian; I don't believe in all this traditional stuff. It's fine." The piece was just about to be finished when it suddenly broke into two for no reason. I'm always careful to work in private since then and to honor the private conversation with the stones.

I teach others how to listen to stones and to understand that this process of vibrations, rhymes, and music is a personal, tactical and spiritual process. When you work this way, the stone will be happy and so will you. In the end, when a piece is complete and finds its proper home... it sings.

Ekenyagwechwechachwecheria (2022)

In this body of work and exhibition, four artists, including Elkana, met regularly to discuss the journey of grief after all artists had lost significant people in their lives. In late 2021, Elkana's dear wife passed away. Here are some reflections from this project:

...We were talking about a word: "grief." It just doesn't seem like the right word to explain the experience of an up and down, mysterious process of loss and transition into a new way of living. We were all quiet. Elkana suddenly said, "Ekenyagwechwechachwecheria," at first quietly then with more excitement in his voice, "Ekenyagwechwechachwecheria!" We all laughed. What in the world was this word!

Explaining the word turned out to be just as complicated as pronouncing it. *Ekenyagwechwechachwecheria* is a Kisii word for a type of lizard that's commonly found in the area. Elkana described it as, "a being that changes colour like a chameleon, so it quickly blends into whatever environment it is in. It seems to appear and disappear, you may try to follow it but

quickly realise you can't, it can sneak up on you and seems to speak to you but you don't understand, it is everywhere and nowhere."

We all began to nod at his description of what is an animal but could also be a process of trying to find one's way in a new circumstance, or of trying to understand one's own emotional landscape. It seemed the perfect word for what the group was exploring.

Elkana's reflections on death and his journey of grief:

"I've gone through a lot in my time; in fact, I've died many times and it's a miracle I'm still here. Death and loss are strange things. I've been close to death myself and it has been reported in the media and at large events that I've attended that I had passed. How awkward it was when the speaker realised I was standing just there.

When you experience many losses and battle through an illness, you can't help but to consider how your own passing will be. I've had many conversations with my relatives about where I will be laid to rest after I pass and after having meetings about this, they come back to me just to tell me that I should wait and find out when the time comes.

But right now, at this moment, I'm experiencing many things all at the same time... and they are concrete things, not imagination. They come in dreams (where almost all my artistic pieces originate) but sometimes these dreams are reality. These things are beyond works of art or videos but are a million emotions. We must understand that expressing emotions is a must and I am putting my emotions into this work. This project, this work, this group has been a beautiful blessing."

The Elephant Family Finds a Home (2019, updated 2024)

In 2014, Kenyan artists were invited to participate in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC to showcase Kenyan art and culture. The centerpiece of the festival was to be a granite sculpture by renowned Kenyan artist Elkana Ong'esa. The plan was to fly the partially complete 12-ton Elephant Family sculpture to the US where Elkana and his team of sculptors would finish the piece during the festival. After completion, the sculpture would remain on the National Mall in Washington, DC as a proud gift from the Kenyan people.

The nation was excited for the festival and the sculpture, and plans were made for many Kenyan artists to fly to the US to host a series of art and culture demonstrations during the festival. It was a proud moment for Kenyans and the creation of the sculpture showed up in the newspapers as the nation cheered.

What ended up happening was a great tragedy for Kenya. The millions of shillings allocated for the festival disappeared, and the *Elephant Family* sculpture never made it to the US. In the end, the Kenyan participation in the festival was poorly organized and many artists went into debt to attend the sad event. Elkana himself took bank loans to cover the costs of the sculpture. He was never paid for his work.

Since the festival, the Elephant Family was part of a legal battle to reimburse the artists who participated in the festival and particularly those who had worked on the sculpture. Physically, the sculpture was unceremoniously dumped at the National Museum on its side. No one knew what to do with this sculpture that is estimated to weigh 13 tonnes.

As the Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH) has a long and fruitful partnership with the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) TICAH proposed to Elkana and NMK that maybe they could help find a respectful home for the sculpture until the court case was settled. Both parties were excited about this prospect. TICAH managed to transfer the sculpture from the National Museum to another NMK site – Uhuru Gardens, where TICAH once managed a public arts space. In February 2018, the *Elephant Family* was carefully moved



Part of the Elephant Family

from the National Museum to its new home between the trees and other artworks of this space within Uhuru Gardens. In September 2018, Elkana Ong'esa and his team of sculptors were finally able to realize their dreams of completing the sculpture.

In March 2019, Elkana won his legal battle and was awarded millions to reimburse him for the money and time he put into the sculpture.

In 2020, Elkana's Elephant Family found a permanent home in another section of the newly renovated Uhuru Gardens where it still stands.

Suzanne Mieko is a Senior Program Manager - Art and Special Projects at Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH)

“Do You Remember How You Mentored Me?”

Gerard Motondi

Some stories begin with a place.
Mine begins with a man.

Often, when I reflect on my journey as a sculptor, I find myself returning to a single, tender question — one that carries gratitude, memory, and reverence:

“Do you remember how you mentored me, Elkana?”

I imagine asking you this not as a formal question, but as one asked quietly across time, across stone dust, across years of carving and travel. Because my life in art is inseparable from your guidance. You shaped not only my technique, but my courage and my belief that a boy from Kisii could speak to the world through stone.

Kisii: Where Stone First Spoke to Me

I was raised among the green hills of Kisii, where the earth feels alive and Kisii soapstone with granite lies embedded like ancestral bones. Stone was everywhere — lining paths, forming walls, resting in fields like silent elders. Even before I knew the word sculpture, I felt drawn to its weight, its permanence, its quiet power.

Village life shaped me in subtle ways. The rhythm of mornings — roosters calling, women sweeping courtyards, children running barefoot — felt like music. Elders told stories in the evenings, voices rising with wisdom and humor. Weddings, funerals, harvests — every event carried ceremony.

Creativity was not taught; it was lived.

Sometimes, I would sit alone, turning small stones in my hands, imagining shapes hidden inside them. I did not yet know I was practicing the beginning of my calling.

Kisii College: Where Instinct Became Discipline

When I joined Kisii College, I felt as though I had stepped into a wider world. The smell of wood shavings, clay, metal, and dust filled the studios. It was there that my raw instinct began to find structure, and where that passion met training.

Still, I felt uncertain. Could I truly become an artist? Did I belong?

Then I met you. You did not teach loudly. You did not rush. You watched. You corrected gently. You demonstrated with precision and patience. When I struggled with a form, you once said quietly:

“Don’t fight the stone, Gerard. Listen to it. It already knows what it wants to become.”

That sentence stayed with me. It still does.

Watching you carve felt like watching a conversation between a human being and geological time. You taught me that sculpture is not simply about cutting — it is about restraint, respect, rhythm, and spirit.

Through your mentorship, I began to believe that art could be a lifelong path, not just a dream.

Your Wedding, 1990: Witnessing a New Chapter

In 1990, I stood beside you on one of the most meaningful days of your life; your wedding. I served as your official photographer, entrusted with preserving the emotion, dignity, and joy of that moment. Through my lens, I saw more than a ceremony. I saw community gathered in celebration. I saw love, commitment, responsibility. I saw how an artist balances devotion to family with devotion to craft. At one point, as you adjusted your suit, you smiled and said:

"Gerard, today we celebrate love — but remember, discipline in life is also discipline in art."

That moment taught me that artistry extends beyond the studio, and goes into character, relationships, and purpose.

China, 2006: Distance Without Disconnection

Years later, our journeys stretched beyond Kenya. In 2006, I attended the symposium in Fujian Province, China, while you were in Changchun, Jilin Province. Though we were in different cities, even different regions, I felt your influence guiding my presence there. Every conversation I had, every piece I worked on, carried echoes of the lessons you had instilled.

China opened my eyes — the scale, the ambition, the reverence for craft. Artists from around the world gathered, each bringing their own culture, stories, and sculptural traditions. Standing among them, I realized that Kenyan stone had earned its place on the global stage — in no small part because of the path you had paved.

African Stones Talk, Kisii: Building a Continental Voice

One of the proudest chapters of our shared history was the African Stones Talk Symposium in Kisii. You served as Chairman — guiding vision, authority, and cultural direction. I served as Organizing Secretary, coordinating artists, schedules, logistics, and dialogue. Together, we helped shape a gathering that brought Africa's sculptural voice into the spotlight.

I remember the energy — artists arriving from different countries, debates about tradition and modernity, elders walking among sculptures, young artists watching with awe. You once said during the event:

"African stone does not need permission to be great. It already carries greatness."

That sentence felt like a manifesto.

Dancing Birds, USA Embassy Nairobi: Learning Lightness from Stone

At the United States Embassy in Nairobi, I worked as your assistant on the *Dancing Birds* sculptures. Those birds seemed to defy gravity — carved from heavy stone yet full of motion, rhythm, and grace. Watching you shape them taught me that stone can express freedom, joy, aspiration — even flight. As we worked, I remember you laughing and saying:

"If birds can dance in stone, Gerard, then artists must never stop dreaming."

In that moment, I understood that sculpture can carry poetry — not just weight.

Smithsonian Elephant Family: Designing Cultural Memory

Another milestone came with the Smithsonian Folklore Elephant Family, where I served on the design team under your leadership. That project felt monumental — not only artistically, but culturally. We were not just carving elephants; we were shaping African folklore into a form that would speak to generations across the world.

I remember standing before the finished forms, feeling the magnitude of it. It was history carved in stone — a bridge between African heritage and global recognition.



Mentorship in Action

My Take-Off: Carrying Your Legacy Across the World

Eventually, my own journey widened. My work carried me to the United States, Canada, China, Israel, Dubai, Germany, the United Kingdom, Turkey, South Korea, India, and Russia. Each country expanded my understanding of art and humanity. Each culture refined my voice. Yet no matter how far I traveled, I carried Kisii in my heart — and your mentorship in my hands.

I realized that mentorship does not end when a student leaves the workshop.

It becomes memory.

It becomes responsibility.

It becomes lineage.

Returning to the Question

So today, I return to the question — not as a student seeking approval, but as an artist honoring his roots:

Do you remember how you mentored me?

Because I remember.

I remember the dust in the studio.

The patience in your voice.

The lessons hidden in silence.

The belief you placed in me before I fully believed in myself.

And every time I lift a chisel, guide a young artist, or unveil a finished sculpture, I carry forward the legacy you helped shape.

This is not only about mentorship. It is about gratitude. It is about continuity.

It is about the living memory carved into stone.

Gerard Motondi is an award winning visual artist and a protege of the late Elkana Ong'esa

The Stone Speaks: A Life Carved in Stone

— Professor Elkana Omweri Ong’esa (1944–2024)

Sylvia Njenga

The hills of Tabaka are quieter now. The steady clink-clink of chisel against stone, a sound that once carried across valleys and decades, has slowed. With the passing of Elkana Ong’esa, Kenya has lost not only a master sculptor, but a cultural anchor: a man who taught us that stone carries memory of people, place, and history, and that African experiences and perspectives can be expressed through its making.

Elkana understood time differently. He worked with materials that would outlast us, shaping stone with the patience of someone who knew that meaning does not rush. His life and practice were guided by the same instinct: listen first, act deliberately, and trust what endures.

I knew Elkana not only as a towering figure in Kenyan art history, but as a generous teacher, host, and fellow traveller in the long, often uncelebrated work of creating space for artists. During my time as Director of Kuona Trust, our paths crossed many times through African Stones Talk, the stone-carving workshops we supported, and ongoing conversations within the wider art ecosystem. I visited him in Kisii, at his home, his museum, and his working sites. These were not separate worlds. Art, life, labour, and lineage were inseparable in his daily practice— from the rhythm of his chiseling, to hosting workshops at home, to the way he taught apprentices and welcomed visitors.

Born in the hills of Tabaka, Elkana never tried to escape them. What propelled him was not a desire to leave, but a refusal to make his heritage small. Kisii stone, in his hands, was never decorative or incidental. It carried weight— physical, cultural, and emotional. His forms insist on presence: they demand that the viewer pause, engage, and consider their weight, scale, and texture. They do not explain themselves, and they do not rush to meet the viewer halfway.

As he once reflected, *“African art needs to stand on its own and express so much that is going on around us, in Africa, as Africans. How do we make that happen properly, continuously, and without prejudice of any kind?”*

When his work travelled to UNESCO in Paris, the Smithsonian, and other international contexts, it did not arrive as a translation of Africa for elsewhere. It arrived whole. Confident. Unreduced. Kisii stone was not softened to fit the room; the room was asked to adjust to it.

Elkana’s sculptures never arrive quietly. They press into the moment you encounter them. Standing before his work, you feel time differently: the pause before movement, the strain before release. *Release*, now held at the Nairobi Gallery, carries this tension without explanation. It does not narrate struggle; it holds it. Birds recur across his work not as symbols to be decoded, but as gestures toward movement, ascent, and uncertainty. Freedom, in his hands, is never settled. Each sculpture tested the limits of material, skill, and imagination, reflecting his belief that creative freedom is something to approach, experiment with, and continually renew.

Elkana rarely spoke at length about what his sculptures meant. He trusted the stone to do that itself. If his sculptures taught us how to look, his teaching taught us how to be. He did not teach in classrooms. He taught in dust through repetition, shared effort, and time. His instruction was

deceptively simple: listen to the stone first. He believed that forcing material was a kind of violence, and this belief extended naturally to how he treated people. He did not reproduce himself in others; he made space for artists to discover what was already forming inside them.

This approach found one of its clearest expressions in African StonesTalk. Held over several editions in Kisii, the symposium brought sculptors from across Africa and the wider world to work side by side in stone. Artists came not to instruct, but to exchange. Different carving traditions, tools, rhythms, and philosophies met at the quarry face. Skills moved in all directions. Without fanfare, Kisii became a place where contemporary sculpture was not only made, but rethought.

The same spirit shaped the many stone-carving workshops Elkana facilitated over the years. These were slow, sustained engagements where technique sat alongside discipline, patience, and confidence. What participants gained was not only skill, but a sense of legitimacy, permission to take their work seriously, to think of themselves as artists, and to see themselves as part of a long, living tradition of stone-carving.

His work with TICAH and the Peace Path Labyrinth at the National Museum in Nairobi showed that he believed art could also heal, that creative spaces could address social and personal fractures, and that by collaborating with institutions and policymakers, artists could help integrate cultural and creative practices into national programs for wellbeing and reconciliation.

As he explained of his process, *"Dreams- where almost all my artistic pieces originate- sometimes these dreams are reality. These things are beyond works of art... they are a million emotions."*

That sense of belonging is perhaps most visible in the monumental granite elephant now standing at the National Museums of Kenya. Originally carved for an international exhibition it never reached, the sculpture found its home instead on Kenyan soil. Elkana accepted this without bitterness. Sometimes, he reminded us, art knows exactly where it belongs.

Today, the Elkana Ong'esa Museum (ELKOM) in Tabaka continues to beat vibrantly at the heart of the community. Its impact extends beyond preserving skills; it formalizes a living legacy of the Gusii carvers, supports new generations of artists, and strengthens the role of cultural practice in community life. His legacy lives not only in monumental stone, but in people: in the hands of young carvers, in the confidence of artists who learned that their work mattered, and in initiatives that show how art can support healing, community connection, and wellbeing.

Elkana Ong'esa taught us that while the sculptor is mortal, the act of making is a conversation with something far larger than ourselves. The stone still speaks. We just have to listen. And in that listening, his work continues.

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The Role of Elkanah Ong'esa in the Evolution and Development of Gusii Soapstone Industry

Mallion K. Onyambu and John S. Akama

Introduction

Elkanah Ong'esa represents one of the most renowned elite sculptors in Kenya and other parts of the world. This iconic soapstone artist and painter hailed from the Bomware sub-clan of the larger Bogirango clan in the Tabaka region in the current Kisii County. The Tabaka region is world famous for its soapstone industry which goes back hundreds and if not thousands of years. Perhaps, one of the main factors that influenced the evolution and the development of the soapstone industry in Ong'esa's home region of Tabaka is the natural occurrence of a rich natural resource of soapstone. This is evident by the many quarries in the region. The soapstone-rich quarries of Nyabigena, Nyabigege and Moma are all located in the Tabaka area where large quantities of soapstone deposits are partially covered. Thus, the people of Tabaka were motivated to develop the art of soapstone sculpturing because the raw material was found within their environment.

Consequently, Elkanah Ong'esa's social, cultural and economic development is closely intertwined with the history and evolution of the soapstone industry in the Tabaka region. According to Elkanah Ong'esa himself (2010) the earliest forms of soapstone carvings were made before the people of Bomware sub-clan of Bogirango clan (who form part of the larger Gusii community) moved to their current homeland in the 19th Century. This assertion is in line with the broader Gusii folk history which contends that the soapstone carving in Tabaka area pre-dates the arrival and settlement of the Gusii people in their current homeland in Southwestern Kenya. It can therefore be postulated that the people of Tabaka might have learned the skill of soapstone carving from these pre-Gusii originators of soapstone sculpturing (Sharman, 1971; Eisemon, 1988; Ong'esa, 2010).

The cultural, social and economic perspective of the soapstone industry

Born in 1944, Ong'esa grew up in a period when the soapstone industry was still closely intertwined with the people's cultural practices and religious beliefs. As he grew up, he witnessed, firsthand, the production and usage of various soapstone products amongst his people. For instance, among the people of Tabaka and the Gusii in general, some soapstone was used in the performance of various cultural and/or religious activities. These included soapstone containers that were used to store traditional medicines. Also, soapstone powder was used to decorate people who performed various traditional rituals such as rain-making, initiation, and burial ceremonies. For instance, Gusii traditional healers and/or diviners used to smear soapstone powder on the hand and face of the person who had come to consult them in order to, figuratively, find out the forms of sickness the individual was suffering from (Ong'esa, 1971; Motondi, 2010).

Furthermore, according to Gusii folk culture, the unique rock art painting found on soapstone at Gotichaki, Sameta, and other sites in Tabaka had ritualistic value. It was culturally held by the original initiators that the carving of specific animals such as antelopes, giraffes and other herbivorous species provided good omen to the hunters.

In the case of circumcision rite of passage, the fine powder was applied to initiates bodies. The use of the powder was symbolic. It was meant to show that the initiates were now in a neutral and

transitional world as they were neither children nor adults. The initiates kept applying the powder even during the time of seclusion to obscure their identification by members of the community.

The powder was further used in a ritual called *ribina*. This was a special ritual dance that was staged during a long dry spell to appease the gods and ask for rain. In preparation for the dance, men and women applied soapstone powder all over their bodies and went to dance at designated ritualistic sites such as hill tops. It was believed that after the dance, the rains would resume to allow people to plant food crops.

Later, soapstone found other uses such as making items of utility like small containers that were used by young men to carry oil (extracted from milk or animal fat) to the grazing fields. The oil was majorly used by the boys as medicine to apply on injuries that they got during their sporting games in the fields.

This led to people seeing the possibilities of making more items of utility. Consequently, utensils like bowls and vessels were made. These were used for eating and storage of food, especially grains, such as millet and sorghum, for milking cattle, and as containers for storing medicine.

The carvers later developed the concept of making smoking pipes *ebibwesi*. The pipes were used by the elderly members of the society to smoke tobacco and marijuana (*enyasore*). Four-legged stools were also made from the soapstone. These stools, that were approximately one foot high, were majorly used by people in the house, especially the elderly.

Transformation of Gusii soapstone carvings into commercialized works of art

It is within this social, cultural and economic background that Elkanah Ong'esa became greatly influenced in the soapstone carving even before attending formal schooling. He grew up in an environment where the mining and sculpting of soapstone was part and parcel of daily life. It was also during this period when external influence in the soapstone industry had started to take roots. Earlier pioneer colonial administrators and adventure seekers who had the first encounter with the people of Tabaka in particular, and the Gusii people in general, at the start of the 20th Century observed with a lot of bemusement and/or admiration, the uniqueness, dexterity, and the overall aesthetic value of the soapstone products (Eisman et al, 1988; Motondi, 2010). Consequently, pioneer colonial administrators and European travelers to Tabaka and other parts of Gusii land made it a point of purchasing pieces of soapstone sculptures. In this regard, the initial response of the colonial administration to soapstone carving was relatively positive.

It is also important to note that, as already discussed, soapstone products were deeply entrenched in the Gusii people's cultural and economic life. The people of Tabaka and the Gusii in general, majorly made soapstone items for utility purposes; thus, the Gusii perceived the soapstone products as functional objects utilized in their daily lives. However, unlike the Gusii, the Europeans purchased the soapstone items for their artistic and/or aesthetic value. Thus, it was the European administrators who transformed the perception of soapstone carving as products of unique art. One of the Europeans who started promoting soapstone carvings as pieces of art was a Kisumu-based German businessman, Edward Koenigsburger in the 1950s (Eisemon et al, 1988). Koenigsburger started encouraging local soapstone carvers to produce commercial level soapstone art. The commercialization of the art did not go hand in hand with a policy framework that would ensure fair compensation, protection of copyright and payment of royalties.

According to Elkanah Ong'esa, one soapstone carver who used to sell items to Mr. Koenigsburger was his own father, Mr. Nelson Ong'esa. Mr. Koenigsburger apparently exported the items to other parts of Europe. In turn, this generated further interest in the items that saw the soapstone industry flourish especially soon after independence. In addition, there are other initial people from Tabaka who played a significant role in promoting the sale of soapstone carvings in Europe and other parts of the world, including Mr. Moseti Ouda who mainly sold the soapstone carvings to Indian traders, and Mr. Roberto Rachami who targeted the European market, while Mr. Omonyi Moindi sold carvings in Tanzania. At the same time, Stephen Nyabwai and Ombasa Ndege targeted Uganda and Tanzania respectively. Furthermore, some of the traders were motivated to move and sell their products outside Gusii following the end of colonialism. In this regard therefore, it is important to note that through the development and promotional initiatives of such initial soapstone producers and marketers, over the years, the importance of soapstone carving to the economy of Gusii and Kenya as a whole became well established.

The influence of Elkanah Ong'esa on the soapstone art industry

Probably there is no person who, over the years, made a major impact on the soapstone art industry as Elkanah Ong'esa. As stated by Ong'esa (personal interview)

While in school, I could make a few carvings for sale in order to support myself. Later on, I chose to go to the Makerere University in Uganda to study Fine Art in the mid-1960s, at degree level rather than going to study accounting at the University of Nairobi. This was because my interest in Fine Art had developed as I had gotten engaged in soapstone carving at a very early age. At the same time, while I served as Librarian at Kisii High School, I had the opportunity to read many books and magazines on Fine Art and painting. Also, while at Makere, I acquired new knowledge and tools for soapstone carving.

Elkanah Ong'esa's education experience took him to Makerere University, the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, and McGill University in Canada. However, in addition to his scholarly credentials in Fine Art, he was primarily known as a sculptor and painter. Over the years, as Elkanah Ong'esa matured in the field of Fine Art in soapstone sculpturing, he became aware that a carving could be made around a theme, in order to increase its artistic value. He then endeavoured to impart this knowledge and skills to other soapstone carvers in Gusii

Between 1976-1978, while teaching Fine Art at Kisii College (the institution that later became Kisii University), Ong'esa made a soapstone sculpture called *Bird of Peace*, which is currently on display at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris (personal interview). He made another sculpture in 1982 in collaboration with John Ndiang'a known as *Freedom Fight*, which represents Kenyan peoples' struggle for independence. This artistic piece is on display at the UN headquarters in New York. His other pieces of art work include a two (2) ton soapstone sculpture called *In Search of Water*. It is based on a popular Gusii folktale in which animals, during dry seasons, dug holes in search of water until they gave up, only for the hare to come along and strike water with his first effort.

Elkanah Ong'esa said that this sculpture (and the story it is based on) can be used to explain other life scenarios. For instance, it represents the way oil companies search for oil and give up prematurely, only for other companies to benefit from their major (and now abandoned) efforts. He made the sculpture for the Caltex Oil Company in 1984. A special plane was needed to transport the heavy sculpture to its final destination in the USA (personal interview).

In 1996, Ong'esa made a sculpture named *Bottle Dance* for the Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia. It is in the shape of a bottle with people dancing around it, and it is displayed at the entrance of a museum in Georgia. He has also made another sculpture known as *The Dancing Bird* displayed at the American Embassy in Nairobi.

It is in these historical, cultural and economic perspectives that Mr. Gerald Motondi (also a renowned soapstone sculptor) posits that the development of soapstone carving in Gusii was

given a significant boost by the efforts of Elkanah Ongesa. He states that Mr. Ong'esa had a unique perspective as a soapstone carver from the local community as a person who had studied abroad, and who also had the opportunity of meeting members of another major soapstone carving community, the Inuit of Quebec in Canada, who were able to earn a decent living from their soapstone carving.

Elkanah's Role in the Enhancement of the Economic Value of Soapstone Products

In particular, Elkanah Ong'esa noticed that the Gusii soapstone carvers were being exploited through a combination of mass-produced, almost identical carvings, and the proliferation of middlemen who paid the carvers very low prices for the carvings. In order to rectify this, Ong'esa brought soapstone carvers together for large-scale production. Consequently, after returning from further studies in Canada in 1987, Mr. Ong'esa played a central role in setting up a major co-operative society, the Kisii Carvers Co-operative Society (KCCS), whose goal was to improve the marketing of soapstone products for the benefit of the carvers. KCCS was set up with the help of the Canadian Government, which had earlier helped Ong'esa to participate in an exchange programme with the Inuit people of Northern Quebec. KCCS, in collaboration with its foreign contacts, enabled Gusii soapstone carvers to profitably export their products from the late 1980s onwards (personal interview). As a result, soapstone carvers were able to improve their standards of living.

Further, Elkanah Ong'esa was also aware that soapstone was a relatively rare mineral and that due to its uniqueness in the world of sculpture, Gusii soapstone carvers deserved to earn a better price for their work. He then set about educating soapstone carvers in Gusii of the value of their carvings, something he achieved through the setting up of co-operatives societies. Significantly, post-independent Kenya has seen most of the carvers and vendors of soapstone organize themselves into co-operatives to enhance the marketing of their products. Currently, there are several co-operatives in the Tabaka area, mostly formed by soapstone carvers.

Influence on the Training of Other Soapstone Artists

Ong'esa's involvement with carvers went beyond efficient production and marketing to maximize returns. He observed that the Gusii did not know that one could study Fine Art at a higher level. In this regard, aside from his activities aiming at improving the welfare of Gusii soapstone carvers, he also aimed at promoting the creation and appreciation of Fine Art as a field of study. Through his involvement and personal effort, Ong'esa encouraged and motivated young people from Tabaka and other parts of Kenya to undertake Fine Art studies; particularly, many of them specializing in soapstone carving. Some of these individuals have undertaken Fine Art studies to degree levels and even beyond. Of special mention is Gerald Motondi. Similar to Elkanah Ong'esa, Mr. Motondi, was born in Tabaka, where under the apprenticeship of Ong'esa, he learned how to carve soapstone at a very early age. He later earned a Diploma and Postgraduate training in Fine Art at Asumbi Technical Training College and Kenyatta University respectively.

Through his expertise as a Fine Artist, Gerald Motondi has managed to win major art awards, and has represented Kenya in various symposia, workshops and conferences, internationally, including art exhibitions in China, Russia, Turkey and Israel. He also has the distinction of having some of his art work exhibited in the world's tallest building, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. Mr. Motondi is clearly following the footsteps of his mentor, legendary Elkanah Ong'esa.

Conclusion

As presented in this article, perhaps there is no individual who has left a major imprint in the Gusii soapstone carving industry compared to the iconic soapstone artist, Elkanah Ong'esa. Born in a region where many people, including his father and other members of the

community were engaged in soapstone production, Ong'esa organically acquired the knowledge and skills of soapstone sculpturing from a very early age. Even before he started formal education Ong'esa was actively involved in the production of soapstone carving, a skill he acquired through apprenticeship by watching and participating in the production of soapstone carvings. Afterwards, Ong'esa became the pioneer person from Tabaka to join formal education with an eventual interest of pursuing professional training in Fine art and painting. Consequently, after acquiring higher educational training and travelling to many parts of the world, Elkanah Ong'esa eventually became one the best soapstone artists, promoter and marketer which earned him national, regional and global recognition.

Over the years, he endeavoured to improve the livelihoods of the people through soapstone production, sales and marketing. He trained many people from Tabaka and beyond specialized skills in soapstone carving and marketing. Realising that his people were being exploited by middlemen, Ong'esa organized and brought people together to form co-operative societies that enabled them to sell their products collectively and fetch better prices, thus enhancing their livelihoods. Consequently, Ong'esa played a fundamental role in the promotion, development and growth of the Soapstone industry locally and globally.

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Drawing of a mysterious creature on soapstone rock



A pellet for mixing red ochre in pre-colonial Gusii



Modern artistic items: from left a flamingo, statue of Mary, chicken, eggs, flower vase and a carving symbolizing unity.



Traditional utility items: smoking pipe, bowls and pots.



Animal carvings: giraffes, lion and fish.



Carving symbolizing "community interdependence"



From left: Mr Elkanah Ong'esa (re-known sculptor), Michael Ranneberger (former USA Ambassador to Kenya), and Gerald Motondi, (Ong'esa's mentee and sculptor of note) at the soapstone carving site in Tabaka.

Elkana as a Bridge: Finding harmony in sharing geographies, histories, spirits and ritual in art practices

Mary Ann Burris

Elkana Ong'esa was, alongside every wonderful thing he was, a bridge. He connected people and ideas. He connected the past to the present. He brought ancient wisdom alive in contemporary circles. He was a consummate match-maker. He welcomed others into his world. He loved introducing people to each other. He brought the best of himself forward to inspire and encourage others. He was selfless. He had a soft humility even after his mastery as an artist was recognized by the world. The elfish light in his eyes lit up a room.

Elkana knew deeply the stories, language, ceremonies, stones, and songs of his Kisii culture and he open-heartedly shared them. He was a leading elder in our *Medicine Wheel* gatherings that brought together indigenous medicine men and women from around East Africa. He shared his prayers and creation stories.

Like many of our deepest wisdom-keepers, Elkana knew that the whole world is animate, alive. He even introduced stones to each other. Over many weeks, we sent a driver named Boaz out in a lorry to collect the stones from elders in their sacred ceremonial places for the Peace Path labyrinth at the National Museum. Elkana knew that these stones have histories, stories, feelings. Carefully, he helped us build harmony between them, a harmony that we still feel when we walk on the Peach Path. And when we realized that once the stones were buried in the ground to form the labyrinth no one could appreciate their beauty, he and his team carved and polished some thirty of those still left and placed them around the perimeter in what we now call "The River of Stones." Because of Elkana's imagination and appreciation for the natural world, school children and others visiting the National Museum can today see first-hand the incredible diversity of Kenya's geology and the impressive talent and creativity of our carvers. All of us have our favorite piece in the River of Stones!

Elkana listened to other people's ideas. He was open-minded. Elkana shared his opinions in the welcoming way that comes from only those who know in their bones who they are and where they came from. He did not need to be right if it made others feel wrong. His curiosity was contagious. His belief in the power of art made other artists, young and old, feel important and seen. He created chances for new relationships, for others to grow, learn, succeed.

No stranger to tragedy and ill-health himself, Elkana could still show up for other people when they were in need. Months after Elkana's adored last-born son, set to inherit his legacy, was found murdered in his house in Kisii, another tragedy occurred. Dabassa Guyo, the beloved Oromo elder who was part of our *Medicine Wheel* team, was kidnapped in Nairobi by the Ethiopian secret police. We were shocked and devastated. We felt powerless. Elkana helped us to pray for Dabassa, to look for others who might help us find him, and then he played a loving role in helping us console each another and honor him when it seemed sure Dabassa was no longer alive (he never returned). Elkana had that gift of showing up for the tenderness of life, its pain and its beauty, without falling into dark holes of hopelessness.

Many stories shared in this volume demonstrate the ways that Elkana encouraged others, found ways to inspire those around him even when he himself was suffering. At a small gathering TICAH hosted to honor Elkana after his passing, Gerard Motondi shared a hilarious story about Elkana arriving at an American Embassy event to launch his Dancing Birds sculpture in 2010 with an unexpected busload of his fellow villagers from Tabaka! At our Rika residency on grief, he consoled others while bearing the loss of his beloved second wife. At our editorial meeting to finalize this issue of *Jahazi*, we heard about the ways that Elkana's residency at Lingnan University in Hong Kong created links between a Chinese pottery factory owner and sculptors, and between very different artists and arts practices, generations and geographies. Wherever he went, Elkana was a magnet, filled with hope and good energy.

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal." Elkana Ong'esa showed us what that looks like. He lived in the present moment. He knew the complexity of this life and he embraced it. He was a peace-maker. In every way and with everyone, he was welcoming. Elkana appreciated those around him. He never stopped learning and exploring, building bridges every step of the way. We honor him. These gifts and his example as a person of integrity, love, humor, and good spirit changed our lives.

Mary Ann Burris is the Founder of Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH)



Mwalimu wa Mwanafunzi: A Tribute to Elkana Ongesa

Lydia Gatundu Galavu

"Mwanafunzi wa Mwalimu!" (Student of the Teacher), Elkana would call out with his signature oomph, and I would reply, laughing, "Mwalimu wa Mwanafunzi!" It was a joyous way of affirming a shared bond: one of mutual respect, rooted in teaching, learning, and art.

The news of Elkana Ongesa's passing came as a deep personal blow. To the world, he was a globally celebrated sculptor; to me, he was Mwalimu - teacher, mentor, and an enduring source of inspiration.

Our bond began in the late 1980s at Kisii College (now Kisii University) where I was among the first intake of art students. In a cohort of 200, we were only two students who had chosen art as our main subject. We were just 20-year-olds, uncertain yet eager, stepping into uncharted territory. It was a bold and uncertain path at the time but under the guidance of Elkana Ongesa, we discovered that it was also a deeply rewarding one. He laid our foundation with humility, brilliance, and deep cultural awareness.

Elkana was no ordinary teacher. A son of Tabaka, Kisii, he descended from the first Kisii stone sculptors, a lineage that began carving soapstone soon after World War II. Yet Elkana was also a pioneer in his own right, merging this deep traditional knowledge with fine arts education from Makerere University and the University of Nairobi. His postgraduate thesis on stone carving in East Africa is still a landmark in Kenyan art scholarship.

One of the most memorable parts of our training was going to Tabaka for practical sculpture lessons. There, at the source of the stone, we carved under the open sky, surrounded by history and the wisdom of the land. Those sessions were more than art lessons; they were moments of cultural transmission. The landscape itself seemed to echo Elkana's teachings. He grounded us not only in technique, but in the cultural significance of the work we were doing.

Over the years, Elkana and I remained in touch. He never stopped referring to me as "Mwanafunzi wa Mwalimu" - and I, in turn, would call him "Mwalimu wa Mwanafunzi". It was a title I held with pride, because even as I grew into a museum curator and sculptor, I always drew from the well of wisdom he had poured into me.

Elkana's impact cannot be overstated. His sculptural works grace public spaces around the world - from the Enyamuchera: bird gifted to UNESCO in 1978, to installations in New York, Atlanta, Changchun, and Nairobi. Locally, his legacy is also deeply rooted. His art adorns the Nairobi National Museum botanical garden walkways, through collaboration with the Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH) and the National Museums of Kenya (NMK). His sculptures are also part of NMK's permanent collection and have been exhibited there severally.

Indeed, the history of art in Kenya cannot be told fully without the name Elkana Ongesa.

Beyond the stone and chisel, Elkana was a cultural thinker. His international symposium "African Stones Talk", held near his home in Kisii, attracted artists from around the globe. He believed in African voices being heard in the global sculptural dialogue and he created spaces, literally and figuratively, where those voices could resonate.

Elkana Ongesa carved more than stone. He carved generations of artists, left imprints on national memory, and shaped how Kenya sees itself in the mirror of art. His was not just a life of production, but of purpose.

To have been taught by him was a gift. To have been mentored by him through the years was a blessing. And now, in mourning him, I find myself returning to those early lessons in Kisii, to the dust of Tabaka, to the spark of understanding that first lit up in his class. As time went by and his health began to fail, that familiar greeting remained but the once hearty "Mwanafunzi wa Mwalimu" grew softer, more fragile. Yet even in its quietness, it carried the same depth of love, respect, and continuity of our bond.

Today, though his voice is silent, I still hear it. And in my heart, I will always answer, "Mwalimu wa Mwanafunzi."

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Father and Son



Remembering Elkana

Various Artists at an Event on 1 October 2025

Since Elkana had become an ancestor in November 2024, the Nairobi arts community hadn't yet physically come together to honor and share stories about him. During the Generations & Memories exhibition, a small event to remember Elkana was organized by TICAH. The following stories were shared by those who attended physically, and others who sent in their tributes later

In-person attendance: Mary Ann Burris, Eric Many, Suzanne Mieke (Rapporteur), Gerard Motondi, William Wambugu, Maggie Otieno, Kevin Odour, Musa Omusi, Wiki, Adam Yawe, Ray Ndikwe, Michelle Coffey, Aghan Odero

Moses Nyawanda, Visual Artist:

I had heard of Elkana Ongesa earlier on in my art career, and to me, the name was so huge in the art field that I never even dreamt of meeting him personally. I read about him in newspapers and admired his influence in the art field as his impact was immeasurable.

Then one day I met him in an event organised by TICAH but all I could do was look at him from afar since he was at the "high table."

In the year 2022, fate had it that we would meet and even share a platform, sad circumstances notwithstanding – I had lost my daughter and he had also lost his wife, and these are the events that got us together. I got a call from the TICAH office with a proposal for a project that was to involve four artists who had recently experienced loss. I accepted the invite. We started with meetings in preparation for the project, and that is when I found myself in one forum with Elkana. We had several discussions and he actually came up with the title of the project, a Kisii word that was hilarious and all of us embraced it.

The four of us (artists) spent a month or so doing the project at The GoDown Art Centre in Kilimani and this is the time that I connected with his golden heart. He was a simple, down to earth, friendly and caring soul to say the least. I would hold his hands (he was not well) when going for lunch and we would talk of simple things in life, art, and crack jokes. It was bliss, especially with someone that I had feared, thinking that he was too high up in the art world. I enjoyed his company a lot, more so, his sense of humour. And he was always in demand by other artists too, TICAH representatives, The GoDown fraternity and even visitors who would come by. I wondered secretly how he managed to cope and accommodate virtually everyone in his vicinity. He had an enormous heart.

It's unfortunate that I never had contact with him after the exhibition, which was hosted after the project's completion. The bad news of his demise reached us and hit us hard. Nevertheless, I attended his funeral with other artists courtesy of TICAH's support. What I experienced during his burial was not a surprise at all, starting from the massive attendance on the ground, including hundreds of artists he mentored. You could feel the love from the community that he lived in.

True to his character, he had several projects, completed or ongoing in the area. This man was a simple giant with a big selfless heart. His shoes are too big to fit us. I can only admire him and learn from him as he rests in his grave. May his soul rest in peace.

Eric Manya, Visual Artist and TICAH Teammate:

In 2022, when we hosted *Ekenyagwechwechachwecheria*- An exhibition on Grief with Musa, Iddi, Moses and Elkana, there was a workshop going on at the GoDown where we were working. That evening Elkana called me and said he had seen Peterson doing some interesting work and he wanted to stay an extra night to participate in the workshop on printmaking. Peterson said it was an honour to host Elkana.

Elkana was ready for the workshop and said, "Today I'm a student. I'm going to listen and learn and see what other things I can do beyond sculpting. This is a new beginning for me." He learned printmaking with MDF boards, then he thought about how this work could also be done with stone. The class then turned into Baba's class and into stone printing. Peterson gave him a set of cutters at the end of the day to take back to Kisii to keep working with. Peterson and I co-own this piece that he made; it is probably one of the last pieces he carved himself.

I had a father/son relationship with him. I met him in 2005 and he was encouraging us as usual and I was amazed at how articulate and helpful he was. After that I didn't see him again until 2016 when I was working on a mosaic at Uhuru Gardens. Elkana showed up and we got to talking. The next day he came back to check on the progress of my work and we talked. He started encouraging me to use soapstone. Any chance he had to share about soapstone, he would, because that was his expertise and he loved them.

Years later I was working on a project called Urembo and Hekima and he invited me to Kisii. I stayed with him and we'd talk constantly, late into the night. We became really good friends. Whenever he came to Nairobi, I would drop everything and be with him. I met so many people through him. Just before we opened *Ekenyagwechwechachwecheria* he wasn't feeling well and I had to help him make it through the opening and he soon went back to Eldoret, but he was lonely there. When he moved to Kisii, I knew his time was coming.

Maggie Otieno, Visual Artist:

Elkana was such a special person and I can't remember when I met him but I followed his work and admired him. When I started my sculpting journey I started with wood and moved to stone and worked with stone from Wanyiki and Wanjau. We looked up to Elkana. I worked for an organisation called African Colors that was supporting contemporary artists online. Someone sent us an email looking for a stone carver and the first person to come to mind was Mzee Elkana. Three months later he came to our office in Chester House telling us that he was going for a residency and he remembered that day years later when we met at Uhuru Gardens. He would tell people, "See, Maggie took me for a residency."

He really expressed gratitude. Sometimes when people get to a certain stage in their careers they forget the people who were ladders for them along the way. One day at Uhuru Gardens he wanted to go to the office, so I walked with him and we talked. When we got to the stairs he asked if he could hold my hand and I said of course. He laughed and told me, "Never believe anyone when they say that old is gold." I told him that at least he could walk. He was always inviting me for the African Stones Talk Symposium and to visit Tabaka. His spirit is with us and with it is a lot of love, a lot of memories and his journey. I'm happy we get this chance to share and listen to our stories of him.

William Wambugu, Retired NMK Head of Botanical Gardens:

I'm not an artist or sculptor, but through TICAH I became good friends with Mzee. We used to call each other *Mzee*. I remember he was one who always encouraged others. He was devastated when the Kenyan government failed to keep their promise to transport the *Elephant Family* sculpture to the 2014 Smithsonian Festival held in Washington DC.

I learned a lot of patience through him. He had such perseverance and patience. As much as his physical body may have been weak, he didn't have a closed mouth and was always

ready to share. He loved to observe birds, and said they told him a lot. Someone today asked me if I was a sculptor, and I said I'm trying. I'm trying to do more listening and sharing on the cultural matters and I learned this from the elders like Mzee.

The experience I got through him of endurance, patience and perseverance is what I will continue to remember and practice from him. When you are doing the work of elders, we must allow the grey hairs to grow. There are things we are called for and as the cultural leaders we are doing the fighter's work. Today the artists are told they will be taken care of but this is never taken up. We need the elders there for us to learn. It's unfortunate that he had to go but when you look at the cultural work he did, it is our duty to continue. This is what I learned from Elkana.

Listening and then doing, not listening and not doing (which is where I think this country is). The museum's management let him down, but I hope things will be better.

Kevin Odour, Visual Artist:

When I first met Elkana I actually didn't manage to "meet" him – I know this sounds funny! What happened was, I went to the museum and saw a piece with his name on it. So I was very curious, and I wondered, who is this man? I kept hearing about soapstone carving and kept hearing his name but it was a long time before I met him in person. When I started my practice, more as a painter, I was told to go to the Chinese embassy, and what do you know, I finally met him, and he told me how to apply for residencies abroad – come with photographs, what to write, etc. He was trying to help us out. My second encounter with him was at the museum in Nairobi, where he told us about soapstone. He always insisted I visit Kisii and so I went and it was my first time there. You can get old but you have to embrace the young ones. He was easy to talk to and he was great with the young ones. He was very humble and great.

Musa Omusi, Designer:

I'm grateful for Elkana and all the interactions we've had. I began to see myself in some new ways after interacting with him. I met him through *Ekenyagwechwechwecheria*, and I knew of his work but I didn't know anything about him, I had never seen him or interacted with him.

You could tell he was a leader, but a leader of the people. He was firm in his show of direction but open and gentle to everyone's thoughts and ideas. I loved how he would tease you while teaching you, to help you open your mind through gentle prodding. This showed me that to be a leader, you need to listen to the people first, and that you can guide with gentleness and yet still be firm. He was very inspiring to me. People of his generation perhaps are disgruntled because of what they lived through, but there was a lot of hope in how he lived and how he existed.

As we talked about what we wanted to create within the *Ekenyagwechwechwecheria* project on grief and then went into workshops together, I had been thinking a lot about birds. In my culture, birds are those beings that communicate with our ancestors and I wanted to take this into batik and into a piece. When he saw this, he asked me, "what is this?" When I explained the idea of how the bird is helping me to express something I don't know how to express yet, he said he would help with the piece, so we worked together. It's a surreal memory because it's like things were appearing in this work as we created. I was feeling a lot of emotion and also finding a lot of peace. I'm grateful for that experience.

The last time I saw him, we had travelled to Kisii to see him in the hospital. I took from that experience how much strength he had. Even in his lowest moments he was still solid, he was at ease, he was present, and he created an environment where we could be who we are and be solid in ourselves as well.

He taught me to be a gentle leader, to be approachable and helpful and taught me how to stay grounded and strong, and that humour is the best medicine. There was always a joke, there was always something light and an opportunity to laugh.

Gerard Motondi, Visual Artist and Longtime Friend of Elkana:

I can say a lot about Elkana Ongesa. He was one person who has shaped me to be who I am and what I am. I have thought about writing a book about him because of the way I interacted with him so closely. I'm from the same village of Ongesa. He was so famous and I heard how he was the first person from our village to go to Makerere University.

When I went to school, I didn't study art and figured out this talent much later. I remember in primary school, I was excited to use marker pens and make colours on paper. After college I decided to study art, so I registered but had no teacher or mentor. I passed and became a teacher and started teaching in high school and was told to introduce art into the school. I became the only art and craft master in the whole county during that period.

In 1989, Elkana's first wife passed away. He was a lecturer at the time, and he decided to retire. That's when we met and he asked me to be his photographer for his second wedding. He saw something in the work and asked me to help him with the marketing of Kisii stone after the photographer who was commissioned to do this work didn't do well. I did it and he liked my work. During this time, he had been commissioned to do a Caltech sculpture and I became his trainee (also while I was at Kisii University). He liked my sculpting and kept my first piece. He saw something in me.

He took me to *African Colours* and my work was on that website. In the 90s he told me to have an exhibition and I had one at the French Cultural Centre in Nairobi. I was getting more exposed. I kept working with him and he was a very selfless person as everyone mentioned. He had gone to Canada to talk about Kisii soapstone and he managed to get scholarships for others. He was given a grant to start a marketing company but he never started his own company. He went to the community to start the Kisii Soapstone Cooperative Society in Tabaka.

There was a time we were held up by gunmen but we survived, and thereafter hosted a politician who was going to help our community. He was so selfless and always thought of others. He brought me along on his journeys to gain experience and also opened opportunities for me – in Japan, in China. When I went to China I learned about the power tools they used and I purchased some for me and some for him. At this point we started working on granite.

I wanted to retire 5 years ago but he said not to. When I was posted to West Pokot, he encouraged me to go, and every time I came home, I would bring him the famed honey from the area. It's through him that I've travelled, that I've had opportunities to learn, that I've met people... he'd bring the whole community with him wherever he went, once he took the whole community to the US embassy for an event.

We worked together on a number of projects – the last one was the *Elephant Family*. I learned a lot from him. He was a very good storyteller, and we would talk even until midnight. In the morning, we would start again. He lived just across from me and we talked a lot.

We talked about having our own symposium, managed to get a grant from UNESCO, and started the symposium with international artists in 2011. They came from all over the world and we hosted them in our houses, living and cooking together. They shared their skills with local artisans. People thought we were rich and there was a lot of news coverage.

It's on this pedestal that I've been allowed to experience the world. He was called many things - *Soko Simba* (grandfather lion), professor - even though he didn't have that formal education, but he had all the knowledge of the community and beyond.

Wiki, Visual Artist:

I always had art in my life but had difficulty accepting it because of pressures around me. I went to the university to study engineering, but I still practiced art. We did large format paintings for ads and more before large printing came in. In this journey I wasn't able to chart out a path for the art direction I wanted, it was based on what was available to me. I had this drive towards art to the disappointment of my parents, who now appreciate it. At some point when I was at Kuona Trust, I attended a workshop on printmaking where I met a sculptor who worked in granite. This was a first for me. He had never had an exhibition. We decided to do a joint exhibition as long as I could learn from him. That was the first time I encountered the tools used for working with granite and learnt how expensive these tools are.

During the Rika Residency by TICA on sculpting in 2019, I met Elkana. I had only known of Elkana but had never met him - only knew him in an academic way after reading about him. I saw him as a godlike person and didn't think I'd be able to talk to him, and I just observed him from afar. I thought Elkana Ong'esa would be a huge guy with a huge presidential presence, but he was just sitting on the ground with young people talking freely. I edged closer to him and finally talked to him and it was a surprise. He is one of the humblest people I've met in the art scene.

I told him about my interests and he encouraged me to experiment and try sculpting. What surprised me was his presence of mind – I didn't think he'd pay me any attention, but when I finally talked to him, I realized he was so patient and so thoughtful in listening and thinking through how to converse with me. Everything I was curious about he addressed and that we were able to do that in a single setting, was amazing. It was like we had known each other for a decade even though it was the first time we talked. I told him about the granite in my rural home. Where I come from in Senna near Kisumu, there is granite everywhere. My grandmother even ground flour on a granite stone. Elkana encouraged me to give it a try and work with it. He shared with me how to access the tools and how to go about it in a viable way.

When I left that workshop, I knew where I was going to start and had made a decision that this was what I wanted to do. By the time the Covid-19 virus came in 2020, I had collected all the tools and started my studio in my village, inspired by Elkana and using the stones in my area. When my father passed on in 2020, I worked on his headstone. Elkana was a turning point in my career.

Ray Ndikwe, Photographer:

I came to know Elkana through TICA. Although I'm not a sculptor, Elkana still had a big impact on me. I was doing the documentation of the *Ekenyagwechwechwecheria* project. I didn't know him before, but when I met him, I didn't realise he was so big. I posted a picture of him online, and the reaction made me realise how big he was. To me he was this nice *mzee* who was very approachable. Eventually I realized the impact he has on people he knows very well.

The biggest encounter was when we visited him at his home in Tabaka, in Kisii County. We were sitting together just a few of us and I got to know him deeper then. What really encouraged me was this encounter – we don't usually see old artists that much, it's often a young person's thing, but being with him was very fascinating and encouraging. He encouraged everyone to just be themselves and not to conform to what others want, and encouraged us to go deep into art and expression as a calling. I always appreciated that about him. He had a big spirit and energy and he gave that to others. He would poke you if you weren't being present. He was very selfless, inclusive and encouraging.

When we went to his museum, it was almost unbelievable that he actually owned that space, and how he managed to encourage so many people through his work, and who he was. You see the success of an artist in how they live and I saw that in Kisii, and more specifically, in Tabaka. The experience there was amazing, and I wish I had footage from that trip – but I didn't do any video shooting then, as I was experiencing it myself, and it was great.

He was my friend and he encouraged me to have the same impact that he had with all of us. The biggest body of work is what you leave with other people.

Michelle Coffey, Lambent Foundation:

There are many gifts I'd like to share about Elkana and it's nice to be in this community to honour him. Mary Ann introduced me to Elkana during one of his healing journeys and all that he was working through to sustain his health and his family's health.

I didn't have the artistic relationship that others had but where we connected more deeply was different. It wasn't in an intellectual space, but being with Elkana, and especially on the Peace Path [at the National Museum], it was immediately a connection to my heart, that even dropped below into my soul, that I feel in my gut.

We had amazing conversations. He taught me to trust my gut and my soul and to slow my mind down and just be. This was scary to me. I so need these moments as I imagine many of us do. That is the gift he left me and it's still there and still alive.

Mary Ann Burris, TICA Founder:

I met Elkana at Trust for African Rock Art and at a US Embassy event before we actually ever worked together. I remember that even at these receptions, we talked about deep things, cultural things. There was something about the ease in which he was able to go deep that was remarkable. And, always, there was also laughter when you were talking with Elkana. He had a fabulous sense of humour.

Our working relationship started with a vision I had about trying to create a place for healing after the post-election violence in 2007/2008. I wanted to help build a shrine or piece of collective art at the National Museum to honour those who had died and to reinforce our shared humanity. We started by trying to bring together Kenyan elders to talk about how to mark the times and bring peace and community together. It kept failing and then I got the sense that we needed to allow the earth to lead, not us humans. I had learned from my grandmother that you ask permission from the earth, from stones, to interact/take them and then to listen to them. Decades later when I was thinking through how to allow the earth to lead this peace-building work at the Museum, I was connected to a piece of land at NMK by Mr. Wambugu. It was perfect. Dabasa Guyo, a well-respected Oromo elder, and Elkana Ong'esa seemed to just appear as if they were sent to do this work. Gerard Motondi and other Kisii stone carvers also were a part of the inception of the ideas about how to build the Peace Path.

We started meeting and it became clear that what needed to happen was to ask stones to come from all over Kenya, to welcome them and bless them and that they would create and hold the space. We engaged a driver named Boaz to drive his lorry around Kenya meeting elders we already knew and asking them if they would contribute stones for what was to become the labyrinth we now call the Peace Path. Every elder agreed. No money changed hands. Again, it was as if the stones were talking to us, agreeing to leave home and join us in Nairobi. When the stones arrived, Dabasa would bless them and welcome them. Once they had all arrived, Elkana and his team began cutting them to fit into the pattern of the labyrinth, to mark the ceremonial walkway that is still there today.

The *Peace Path* became a sacred space for all of us. Elkana's cancer treatment during the time worked and Mr. Wambugu felt he was healed from a life-threatening car accident through the process of building the labyrinth and walking it once it was complete. There was an openness of spirit that allowed this space to come together. Elkana and the team helped make this possible.

When Dabasa was kidnapped in 2015 and taken to Ethiopia to disappear forever, the many Kenyan elders who had by then formed around the *Peace Path* ceremonies in TICA's Medicine Wheel program, prayed for him. Elkana, despite many hardships of his own, was always strongly and joyously present in these prayers and ceremonies. He was a peace

maker, and he always brought others from his community with him to join us. Elkana knew his culture deeply. His example of open-hearted sharing made it easier for other elders to also share things they may have never talked about outside of their own tribal ceremonies and local discussions. His close relationship with his wife, too, was an example to others. He often brought her with him to our ceremonies. Over time, more women did join the Medicine Wheel events.

Another story that demonstrates Elkana's specialness was during the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 2014. I arrived to find that his sculpture *The Elephant Family* had not arrived as promised. This was the first time I had ever seen Elkana cry. There we all were: the plinth had been built on The Mall to receive the statue. The carvers were there to finish it and present it to the US government. And, then Elkana got the news that the *Elephant Family* was left on the tarmac at the airport in Nairobi. It was not going to make it to Washington, DC. We were all in shock. While all of this was unfolding, hundreds of people were in the big Kenya tent waiting and waiting for the Kenyan ambassador's representative to arrive to open the festival. Almost an hour went by. People were getting restless. And then someone asked Elkana to go to the podium and officially open Kenya's pavilion at Folklife. I watched him accept this assignment without hesitation. Instead of complaining about what had just happened, Elkana drew a deep breath and smiled at everyone there. He talked about how beauty and art of all kinds connects all of us. He rose above his personal tragedy and the bitterness that could have resulted from this betrayal, and took the high ground. It was a beautiful celebratory speech during a time when many of us were angry and upset. Elkana could have told the world a very different story on that day, but instead he tried to inspire everyone with the power of creativity and unity. He used this opportunity to shine his light on what is good and possible instead of complaining about one of the biggest disappointments of his own artistic career.

Elkana was able to listen to others and hold space for others, to learn, to hear, to connect. Elkana was a special man, an example for others. He was absolute grace. He was open. He showed up for us and we showed up for him.

Aghan Odera, Former Kenya National Theatre Director:

I had the privilege of working with Mzee being a neighbour from where I come from and through TICA's Medicine Wheel work. We had many conversations and private conversations as we were both practicing artists and elders.

At that time, I had the privilege to have a long interview with him - where he grew up - framed as a conversation between generations. As the interviewer, I had planned some questions about his life and his home. Our conversation went far to Uganda and the 1960s and also to differences between generations, practices, practitioners, spaces and inspirations. I'm in the process of getting that raw footage to inform a reflective writing that I plan to do.

It strikes me that the transition has happened and that things are so sacred. I wish I had had more time for those conversations. He had a decisive way of looking at the arts and cultural work across generations - from pre-independence until now. He was a very humble man - his presence wouldn't intimidate people and it's his personality. He was approachable and accessible and could talk to younger people and older people, all people.

A lot of my conversations with Elkana looked at how art and culture have contributed to this experiment we call Kenya over time. I've been going through the archives to watch the interviews and other videos with him and other elders from all over Kenya. I hope to contribute my writing to something about Elkana one day.

A Legacy Carved in Stone: Remembering Elkana Ong'esa Through Art, Heritage, And Collaboration

John Ong'esa Masese

Elkana Ong'esa, born on November 28th 1944 in Tabaka Village, Gucha South District, Kisii County—about 400 kilometers southwest of Nairobi, Kenya—was more than just my older brother. He was my lifelong collaborator and mentor. We came from a long line of traditional stone carvers, a craft passed down through generations. Our father, Mzee Masese Mbera Ong'esa, a respected stone sculptor, even taught carving to prison inmates where he worked as a Prison Officer. Our mother, Mama Milka Mbera in turn, was a renowned traditional basket weaver (ekee) and potter. Together, they created a home environment rich in creativity and skill.

Early Influences and Foundations

Our artistic journey began in childhood, greatly influenced by our father who recognized our unusual fascination in shaping things. He brought us soft grey clay from a nearby river known as Suguta, encouraging us to model toys. These humble clay figures kept us busy for days, forming the basis of our creativity. He allowed us access to his traditional hand tools - simple instruments that became our first creative companions.

Our village life shaped our identities as Kisii Stone (*Chigware*) carvers by observing our father and other elders in our community. Nature was another profound teacher. It provided us with birds, fish, and other animals, which stirred our imagination and influenced our carvings for the tourist market. Over time, we transitioned into carving more complex animals and human figures. This shift was greatly influenced by our late uncle, Alexander Mogendi, a respected Kisii sculptor who taught us to venture beyond repetition of time tested forms and embrace imagination and abstract forms.

Elkana's Formal Education and Artistic Journey

Elkana Ong'esa began his formal education at Riosiri Primary School (Class 1–4) from 1954 to 1957. He later proceeded to Nduru Intermediate School (Class 5–8) from 1958 to 1962. His strong academic performance earned him admission to Kisii High School, where he studied from 1963 to 1966.

At Kisii High School, his homegrown artistic abilities continued to grow. He participated in art competitions organized across Kenya and won numerous awards. The most remarkable was when he won a pocket radio in a competition organized by the Kenya Freedom from Hunger in 1965, where the organization was celebrating its achievements since independence. His successes in this period helped to secure admission to Makerere University-Margaret Trowell School of Fine Arts in Uganda in 1967, and he obtained a Higher Diploma in Fine Art (equivalent to a Bachelor's degree) in 1970.

At Makerere, Elkana encountered influential artists such as John Odojamey and Francis Nnaggenda. Through the exchange of ideas and exploration of new techniques, his creative

horizons broadened and his professional foundation strengthened. After graduation, he pursued professional teacher training at the University of Nairobi – Kenyatta University Campus, obtaining a Diploma in Education. Upon graduating from Makerere University in 1971, Prof. On’gesa was posted to Kisii High School from 1971–1972, where he taught Art. He later moved to Kisii Teachers College, as a Senior Lecturer and Head of Creative Arts from 1975 to 1989, a period during which he produced many of his notable commissioned sculptures. While at Kisii Teachers College, he proceeded to McGill University in Canada, graduating with a Master’s degree in Education. After retirement from Kisii Teachers College, he joined University of Eastern Africa, Baraton as a Lecturer in Art Appreciation from 2001–2003.

Over time, he explored new areas of art - painting, metalwork, wood carving, and ceramics before dedicating himself fully to stone sculpturing—working in granite and sandstone using modern power tools. This innovation earned him recognition as a pioneer of hard stone carving in East and Central Africa.

Elkana’s ideas and sculptures are documented in significant publications, such as *Stories in Stone* (1987) which was co-authored by Thomas Oieseman and Lynn Hart, published by La Fédération des Co-opératives du Nouveau-Québec and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. I contributed artworks that served as visual references in the text. This book remains a key reference for scholars studying African and Arctic indigenous art practices and intercultural exchange.

He shared his newfound knowledge with me—books, sketches, and ideas—which deepened my own appreciation, particularly for abstract form. From 1970 until his passing in 2024, we worked together as a team—united by blood and bound by a shared artistic vision. In 1986, during an exhibition at the Gallery of Contemporary East African Art, Shenna Ginnings, then curator at the Nairobi Museum, wrote (July 8, 1986):

“One purchaser of your sculptures who was touring through Kenya remarked that he viewed many sculptures in town but could not find any as compelling.”

These affirmations recognized both technical mastery and the spiritual depth of our stone art.

Exhibitions and International Recognition

Our first joint exhibition was in 1970 at the Uganda Museum in Kampala, marking the beginning of our shared professional artistic journey. Later, we participated in a number of significant exhibitions, including:

- **1979** – Cultural exhibition in Stockholm, Sweden
- **1986** – Exhibition at the Kenya National Museum, Nairobi
- **1989–1991** – Traveling exhibition across Canada showcasing Inuit (Eskimo) and African stone sculptures
- **2004** – Group exhibition at the Grand Regency Hotel, Nairobi

These exhibitions elevated Kisii stone sculpture to global attention and contributed significantly to presenting African contemporary art as deeply philosophical, spiritual, and technically refined.

Major Projects and Collaborative Achievements

Elkana’s individual work reached audiences across continents and established him as one of the globally recognized African sculptors of his generation. His major commissions and collaborative initiatives reflect both artistic excellence and cultural diplomacy.

Among the most notable projects are:

1. **1978 – Enyamuchera (The Bird of Peace)**, permanently at UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France.

2. **1984 – In Search of Water**, commissioned by Caltex Oil Company (**now Chevron Corporation**) in Houston, Texas, USA.
3. **1987–1988 – “Stories in Stone”** Cultural Exchange Program, between Kisii, Kenya, and Inuit artists of Canada. This initiative culminated in the publication *Stories in Stone* (1987), co-authored with Thomas Oiesman and Lynn Hart. Published by National Museums of Canada and Federation of Co-operatives of Northern Quebec, Canada. I (John O. Masese) contributed sculptures featured in the book.
4. **1996 – The Dancing Bottle**, a Kisii stone sculpture at the **Coca-Cola Olympic Museum**, Atlanta, Georgia, USA.
5. **2006 – Her Mother**, a bronze sculpture at the **World Sculpture Park**, Changchun, China.
6. **2010 – The Dancing Birds**, installed at the **Embassy of the United States**, Nairobi.
7. **2011 – Co-organized the first International Stone Sculpture Symposium in Kisii, Kenya.**
8. **2014 – Elephant Family**, centrepiece sculpture at a **Smithsonian** exhibition in the USA, currently displayed at **Uhuru Gardens**, Nairobi, Kenya.
9. **2015 – Legacy Monument**, a Black Granite sculpture at Adventist University, Rongai - Kajiado
10. **2016 – Mother Carrying Firewood**, a Basalt sculpture in a Private Collection, Limuru - Kiambu

Additional works are housed at the National Archives, National Museums of Kenya, National Gallery, The Mutuma Marangu Sculpture Art Collections (TMMSAC), the ELKOM Museum in Kisii, and in private collections worldwide.

We worked together on large-scale public art and community-based initiatives that empowered local artisans and uplifted livelihoods in the larger Kisii region. Notably, we were involved in donor-supported handicraft projects with organizations such as Save the Children Canada and The Kenya Gatsby Trust, a local NGO focusing on Small and Micro-Enterprises (SMEs) development where he served as a Marketing Manager between 1995–1998.

Through those initiatives, several co-operatives such as Kisii, Gotichaki, Nyabigena and Bosinange Soapstone Carvers were established. These co-operatives facilitated international trade in stone carvings with markets in the US, Canada and the European Union countries, transforming local economies, empowering local artisans to export Kisii Stone artworks, boosting their livelihoods.

Cultural Ambassador

Elkana travelled widely, visiting many countries mainly representing Kenya in art exhibitions and events. For example, in 1977 he attended a sculpture exhibition during the 2nd festival of World Black Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) in Lagos, Nigeria. In 1987, while at McGill University, an exchange programme for stone carvers took him to the Arctic region to work with the Inuit (Eskimo) sculptors who he discovered did similar stone carving as the Kisii. Later in 1990 during the Commonwealth Games in Auckland New Zealand, he exhibited Kisii Stone sculptures.

Other countries visited to showcase his artworks include the USA, Japan, Burkina Faso, China, and Hong Kong.

Collaboration and Historical Connections

Elkana worked closely with important cultural figures including Joseph Murumbi – Kenya's second Vice President after independence. Later, Alan Donovan – a prominent cultural patron, commissioned him to create a memorial sculpture at Nairobi City Park Cemetery,

where Murumbi, his wife and freedom fighter Pio Gama are buried, placing Elkana's work within Kenya's national historical memory. In *My Journey Through African Heritage* (p.188), Alan Donovan describes Elkana as

"A sculptor of uncommon sensitivity and imagination. He is already being acclaimed as one of Africa's finest sculptors."

On the continental stage, Prof. Ong'esa was elected President of the Pan African Association of Visual Artists in Dakar, Senegal in July 2009, affirming his influence across Africa's visual arts sector.

Vision and Legacy - The ELKOM Museum

Ong'esa founded Elkom Museum in 2019 in Kisii Town for artists to learn modern techniques of handling hard stones (granites) using modern power tools. The museum also provides space to host international symposia such as the *African Stones Talk International Sculpture Symposium* (AST), where local and international artists can exchange ideas and share new techniques. The museum is a cultural center that attracts both local and international researchers, art enthusiasts, students and tourists.

The museum further enabled Elkana to continue to generously offer mentorship to young and upcoming artists. His openness to sharing knowledge, experience, techniques and philosophical insight ensured that his influence would continue beyond his own life. This will continue to shape generations of sculptors in Kenya and beyond.

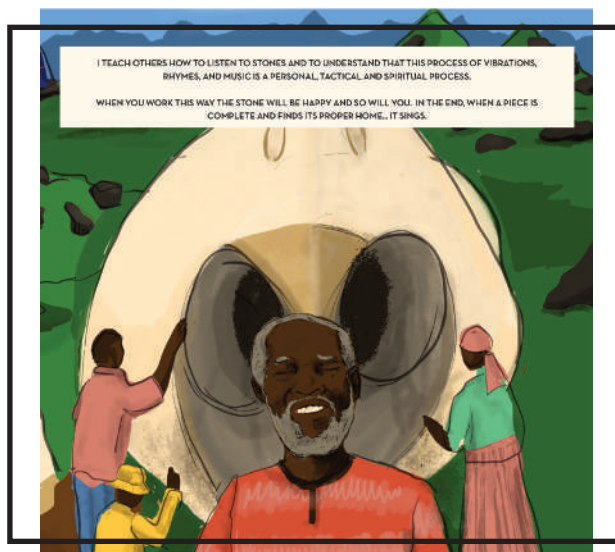
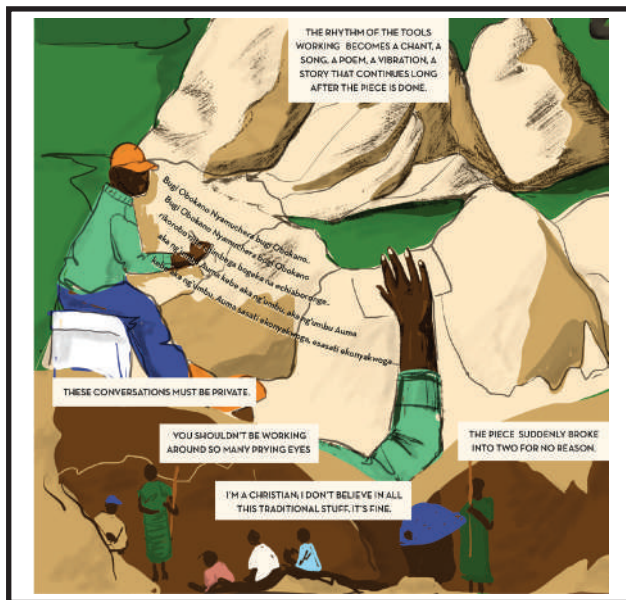
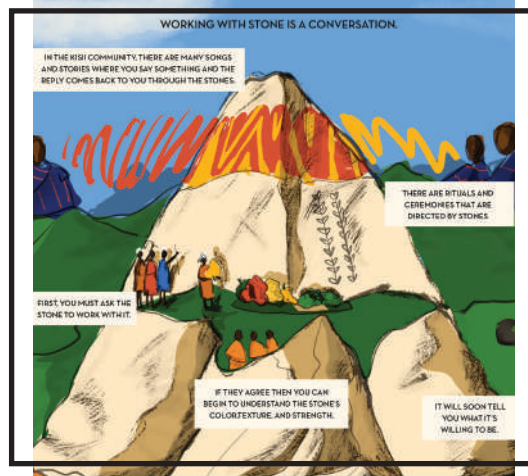
Conclusion

The artistic journey I shared with Elkana Ong'esa spanned over five decades. It was marked by creativity, resilience, brotherhood, and a deep commitment to preserving and evolving our ancestral heritage. While his physical presence is no longer with us, his vision, values, and work continue to inspire generations of artists—both within Kenya and beyond.

As I continue carving stone in our ancestral village of Tabaka, I carry forward the spirit of Elkana in every curve, surface, and symbol etched into the rock. His life reminds us that art is not only a reflection of culture but also a powerful force for unity, education, and transformation.

John On'gesa Masese is a traditional stone sculptor and collaborator in Tabaka Village, Kisii County, Kenya. He is a brother to Elkana On'gesa

Conversations with Stones



On Legacy: A Tribute to our Father, Elkana Ong'esa, and our Brother Sam Ong'esa

Sarah, Emily, and Lorna Ong'esa

The quote, “The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched—they must be felt with the heart” by Hellen Keller sums up dad’s life philosophy. He saw more than the ordinary eye could. He felt deep into the world around him; the people, the animals, the trees, the flowers, the hills and mountains, and of course, the rocks, among many other things. In rocks, he saw shapes, heard stories and music, from rocks he carved out a unique world.

“What do you see...?” was a common question if you ever came across our dad. He challenged and inspired us all to see beyond the obvious. He taught those around him to not just look with the eyes, but with the hands and the heart, to hear what was not spoken, to feel what was not said. Dad was a story teller. With an easy smile and a hearty laughter, he narrated experiences with childlike wonder. Even to his last days, the world was a beautiful place full of wonder.

Some of our earliest memories stem back to our childhood home, which now is the home of The Elkana Ong'esa Museum (ELKOM) – (ELKOM is a bridge between generations; an institution preserving Dad’s pioneering vision of nurturing creativity, expression, interpretation of sculpture through fine art, and cultural continuity).

Affectionately known as ‘Sokoro Simba’, ‘Professor’, ‘Baba Yao’, and ‘Tata’, he had a way of bringing artistic vibes into any situation. He told us stories about our heritage, our language, he taught us our traditional songs, poems and proverbs; some were real and others were fictitious, but all were full of invaluable lessons.

Dad loved bringing people together for different causes. Through his practice as sculptor and a fine artist he brought artists of different walks of life together to share and experience different traditions, experiences, knowledge, skills, and practices – a cultural and professional immersion from different generations and regions. He was the founder of The African Stones Talk (AST) Symposium. He did not believe in working in a silo. He proved that the skills in art and culture are common, transferable, and should be preserved.

Not only was dad a lover of art, he loved books too and introduced us to a world we were yet to see as wee ones. Through books, we visited Japan, China, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Uganda, and many more places. To this day, we visit his collection of books and fondly recall the pictures and stories that made part of our childhood.

“Draw me a sheep!”

The book *The Little Prince* by Antoine De Saint-Exupéry tells the story of a little prince who travelled from planet to planet meeting strange adults along the way, until he landed on planet earth where he met and befriended a pilot who was stranded in the desert. The little prince asked the pilot to draw him a sheep. After a few attempts which the young boy rejected as too old, or looking sickly, the pilot drew a box and explained the sheep was inside it. *The little prince* was delighted. This depicted the simplicity of life and use of imagination. This is very much a reminder of our father, to whom, like this little prince, the world was a place of wonder and excitement. A copy of this book, *The Little Prince*, now lives on my bedside table, a reminder to stay curious and see beyond what the eye can see.



With his children

If there is one thing I miss about our father, it was his ability to see beauty and potential in everything around him. A piece of ugali in his hand at dinner time could very well be a lion today, and a rabbit tomorrow. He was “the artist” who used different media and objects to express his creativity. His view of art was that we should not lose what makes us human, but remain ingrained in it, to never lose our imagination. Art is a way of life that cannot be separated from the soul of man. “What is essential is invisible to the eye.”

Dad was very hardworking. He was unstoppable. Whenever he was working on a piece of art, or had a document to write, nothing could stop him until he was done. This instilled in us, his children, and in many people that he mentored, a culture of diligence. Up until before his passing, he reminded us that it is through hard work that you become somebody. He taught us the essence of building a name for yourself, having a network of valuable relationships, living a simple life with humility.

From this strong foundation emerged our brother, **Samson Mogendi Ongaki Ong’esa**, who not only inherited dad’s technical skill, but also the weight of an established legacy. Today, ELKOM stands showcasing Samson’s curatorial and creative stewardship of our dad – Mzee Elkana’s work.

Through Sam’s involvement in creative and cultural projects alongside our dad, a passion sprung up from an early age which profoundly became evident following dad’s passing. This tragedy transformed Sam’s life to a calling of responsibility, continuity, and purpose. He assumed the mantle of leadership with quiet confidence and resolve. He became the driving force behind the restoration and advancement of our father’s legacy, particularly in the preservation of the Museum and Art Center that Dad had devoted his life to founding and championing.

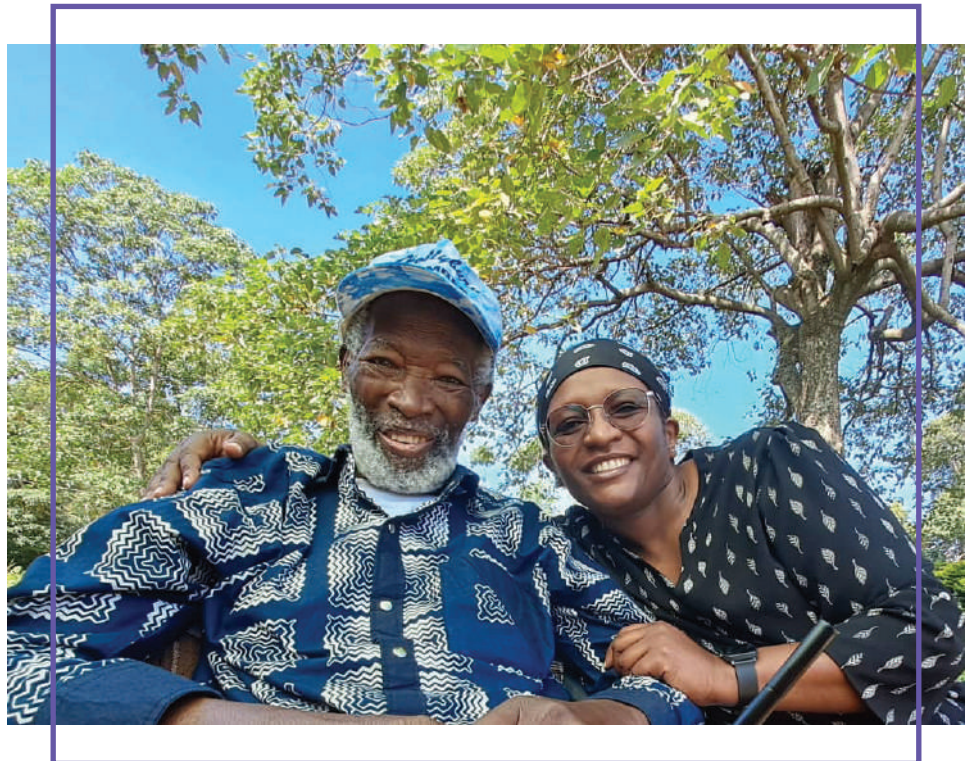
He stepped forward as Chief Executive Officer and Curator of the ELKOM Museum, taking charge of projects that had been left unfinished during dad’s illness. Samson demonstrated

remarkable capacity. In only a few months, he revitalized the museum and its surrounding projects. He worked hands-on, rehabilitating physical artworks and installations, while simultaneously excelling in networking, collaboration, coordination, and community mobilization. The transformation is visible and widely acknowledged.

To us, his siblings, Samson had always been bold, courageous, professional, humble, and teachable. He challenged us with these incredible capabilities. Although his life was tragically cut short, Samson left behind a legacy that continues to guide and challenge us who remain. The void created by his passing has compelled us to continue the work he and our dad had both devoted their lives to – a commitment that lives on through ongoing efforts to preserve, protect, and advance the work they championed.

As a family man, he was especially proud of his sons, Gregory and Jabali, whom he nurtured with care and intention. Their abilities and character, even at a tender age, stand as a living testament to the values he instilled in them.

Samson Mogendi Ongaki Ong'esa may have walked this journey briefly, but his impact was profound. He did not merely inherit a legacy, he activated it, strengthened it, and passed it forward with courage, dignity, and love.



With his daughter Lorna Nyaboke

My Reflections on Elkana Ong’esa

Peter Kenyanya Oendo — Nephew

I was born in 1973, exactly 31 years after my uncle, Elkana Ong’esa. By the time I learned to walk, Elkana had already journeyed across continents, mastered the tools of his trade, and returned home with stories that would later shape my destiny. He had already lived through three decades—rich in purpose, art, and learning—before I ever saw the light of day. By the time I started forming memories, his life was already overflowing with lessons that would anchor me, both as an artist and as a member of the larger Ong’esa family.

Being his nephew, I was privileged to meet him regularly at family gatherings. Even as a child, I noticed how he commanded both respect and attention. Elkana wasn’t just the eldest—he was born into a generation of the most knowledgeable Ong’esas, and he embraced the responsibility that came with that. He served as a bridge between our elders (his parents, my grandparents) and the younger generation—my uncles, cousins, and myself. And he did this not just for the family, but for the good of the wider community.

Elkana was, in every sense, the custodian of our family’s collective memory. He kept meticulous records of family members, safeguarded treasured photographs and cultural artifacts, and documented everything from dowry ceremonies to new unions. He archived not only objects, but the spirit and significance behind our traditions. From him, I learned the importance of legacy, record keeping, and the power of cultural continuity.

Mentorship

When Elkana returned in the early 1980s from his studies at McGill University in Canada, his first stop was our village—Bomware, in Tabaka. I vividly remember him setting up a wall projector and showing us slides from his time with the Inuit in northern Canada. We saw snow-covered homes and sculptures carved from fish bone and stone.

What amazed me wasn’t just the foreign world he presented, but the striking resemblance between the Inuit way of life and that of the Abagusii -both rooted in small-scale farming, community cohesion, and craft. That was an eye-opening moment for me. I wanted to visit the Inuit one day. He brought us knowledge, perspective, and inspiration—and in doing so, planted a seed in me. That seed grew into a journey across continents. I, too, became a sculptor who has now created public monuments in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, China, Romania, and most recently, Uzbekistan. I’m a proud owner/founder of the *“Peter Kenyanya sculpture garden open air museum”* based in Kisii.

Elkana mentored not only me, but hundreds—locally, regionally, and internationally. He imparted skills with a soft voice and firm purpose.

Social Development & Empowerment

In the 1990s, I witnessed one of his most visionary efforts - the founding of the *Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society*. Elkana mobilized over 500 local artisans—men, women, youth, and elders—under one goal - to collectively work and save, and empower one another. Under his patronage, the cooperative bought a transport vehicle, invested in bank shares, and began issuing dividends to its members. He turned carvers into shareholders.

In 2002, when Tabaka Boys Primary School was damaged by a storm, Elkana convened a community meeting and made a bold proposal - each parent would carve a soapstone “chicken egg” to raise funds for reconstruction. The response was overwhelming. Donors followed. Together, they built a permanent stone structure that stands to this day—a monument to creative problem-solving. Elkana always dreamed bigger than the moment allowed. He once joked, half-seriously, about piping water from New York to Tabaka. We laughed, but we also remembered - this is the same man who rebuilt a school through “*soapstone eggs*.”

A Global Artist

In 2008, Elkana was invited to China to unveil his bronze sculpture “*Her Mother*”, the largest he ever created outside stone. I was honored to accompany him. He told me, “Just buy your flight. The rest is covered.” That trip changed my life. Years later, I returned to the same city and carved a ten-ton granite piece titled “*Woman Carrying a Pot*.” He opened the door, and I walked through it.

The Village Becomes Global

In 2011, Elkana organized Kenya’s first International Sculpture Symposium right in our village. Artists from around the world attended, USA, India, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Bulgaria, the UK, and Egypt among others gathered in Bomware. The world came to us. I joined from the 3rd edition onwards—first as a participant, then as co-organizer. Today, whenever I attend symposiums abroad, I’m asked: “Is Elkana’s symposium still running?” That name carries admiration across continents.

Final Years

In his final months, Elkana’s health deteriorated greatly. But even then, our bond grew stronger. I became his bridge to the world. I updated him on exhibitions, global events, and the latest in sculpture. When I told him he’d been selected for the Venice Biennale—our equivalent of the Olympics—he smiled. That selection meant everything to him. It became my way of encouraging him to eat and fight on.

When my father (Nathan Oendo) and later Margaretta wa Gacheru, passed away in 2024, he was crushed. He never fully recovered from this loss. Then, on the 28th of November 2024—his 80th birthday—he chose to say goodbye. Who dies on their birthday? An artist who understands symbolism. Who left on his own terms.

Despite his illness, I watched dignitaries and museum directors visit him. Delegations came from the USA, Italy, Uganda, and Poland. The National Museums of Kenya staff visited regularly. And somehow, amidst the pain, we managed to squeeze in and complete one last sculpture together—a monumental granite bird facing the sunrise (the East) perhaps indicating resurrection. From his bed, he gave instructions. I executed them. When strength allowed, he would come to inspect and make gentle corrections. That process gave him life. It was his therapy. Today, that sculpture still stands in his compound—unfinished, sacred.

What He Held Dear

In his final days, Elkana’s dreams were clear. One unfulfilled dream that saddened him was the Smithsonian Folklife Festival exhibition in the US (2014). His monumental piece meant for the festival was never shipped due to bureaucratic mishandling. It was later installed in Nairobi’s Mashujaa Gardens, but his heart longed for it to be in New York, where it could have elevated the visibility of Kisii culture and brought development to our people. This would’ve been the easiest way to realize the piped water dream all the way from New York to the village of Bomware...literally.

His other dreams included:

- (i) Reinstating art in Kenya’s education curriculum - Thanks to the CBC, art now has a place.
- (ii) Preserving his legacy - His son Sam Ong’esa, his brother John Ong’esa, and I—his nephew (Peter Kenyanya)—carry the torch.

- (iii) Relocating his museum from Kisii town to his final resting place in Bomware village
– A dream yet to be realised
- (iv) Building an art school for children -We appeal to government, cultural institutions,

well-wishers, donors and friends to make this dream a reality.

His Legacy

Elkana Ong'esa was more than a sculptor. He was a visionary, archivist, builder, educator, and a bridge. His studies at Makerere and McGill sharpened his mind. His return to Tabaka kept his feet on the ground. His final masterpiece wasn't carved only in stone—it lives in people, places, and the future.

To me, he was my uncle.

To the world, he was Elkana Ong'esa.

To all of us, he is unforgettable.



Elkana's teaching sessions



Elkana Speaking to a group of local artists in a skills empowerment seminar



Elkana's bird watching the sunrise



Elkana's 20 tone Bronze Sculpture created at the 8th edition of the International Stone Sculpture Symposium in Changchun, China and now permanently displayed at the Northern China Sculpture Park



A traditional dance troupe entertaining guests in one of the organized cultural events. In the background, the building that houses the Kisii Soapstone Carvers

The Fire that brought Warmth: Memories of my Father, Mzee Elkana Ong'esa

Samson Mogendi Ong'esa

My name is Samson Mogendi Ong'esa, I am the 5th born child of Elkana Ong'esa and the first son, and I would like to thank the publishers and editors of this journal for allowing me to express my thoughts and remember 'Mzee' in a special way after his demise.

I have fond memories of when I was young and Mzee was a tutor at Kisii Teachers College. I grew seeing him juggle between classwork, his artistic passion of carving stones and his commitment towards improving the community in numerous ways. He was a loving Dad to all of us and he cherished having family time and introducing to us various entertainment gadgets he would come across in his travels. He also loved to take photos which he did passionately and shared with us in the form of slides via a projector. He encouraged us to take on reading as a hobby by buying us storybooks and novels whenever he found interesting ones. His love for African music made us appreciate songs by Oliver Mtukudzi, Obed Ngobeni and Femi Kuti among others. He loved to listen to country music, especially artists like Vern Gosdin, Kenny Rodgers and Leonard Cohen, who sung the song 'hallelujah' that Dad made us sing along to as if it was gospel.

Mzee taught us how to appreciate art and encouraged practicing it from our tender age. He could bring home smaller pieces of soapstone and give us mallets, chisels and knives to try out the skill. He always appeared amazed by the end products as much as they were just humble attempts. He would encourage us to put in more effort next time. I remember one time my sister Emily managing to carve out a fish which, in my opinion, was a sight to behold for us as kids.

As we got older, he got more involved in his work and travels, which left us in the hands of our mother Dorcas Mokeira Oendo. We lost her in 1990, after she came from treatment in Canada. This fact made Mzee play the roles of both parents, which he handed well.

Samson Mogendi Ong'esa at work



Mzee had a spirit in him that turned dust into gold, he didn't see anything as small, he counted it as an opportunity, even when everyone else was doubtful, he went ahead and did it. This quality always worked to his advantage in his projects. He valued friendships to extreme lengths; whenever his friends visited it was a special occasion to the family.

When I joined him in the field of the art, I started seeing things from a different perspective. I realized he sacrificed a lot for his passion and that on his part this was a worthwhile investment, while us as a family we always felt he was sacrificing too much. From the projects he had done worldwide, he could have become a multimillionaire, but he remained a down to earth person and focused on giving, sharing and improving the lives of the community. He was particularly keen on supporting artists through initiatives such as the African Stones Talk sculpture symposium and Sokoro Simba Kids program, which, as a family, we would like to see continue serving the community according to Mzee's wishes.

There is a large family under the Ong'esa name, most are aging art practitioners with a few from the newer generation interested in the field. As for us – the children of Elkana - we are very passionate about art and practice it in various ways. From our point of view, our father deserves a trophy of the golden heart. We saw him through ups and downs, always with a smile and kind words to offer, even when the economic situation or the difficult life seasons was making things hard for him.

Mzee had a way of finding solutions to any difficult situation and adopting a new approach to whatever he was dealing with; this has inspired me and my siblings to never give-up on anything, as long as it is the right thing to do.

Mzee was a thought leader for the artists of Tabaka and the wider Kenyan art fraternity, as he was involved in policy making and sensitization on artistic rights and freedoms. He had the opportunity of improving the welfare of artists through his work with the Kenya Gatsby organization, which dealt with promoting the creative sector and local producers, specifically through an initiative called the JUAKALI movement.

Through the African Stones Talk Sculpture Symposium, he exposed the Tabaka artists and Kenya's art industry to working with tools on harder rocks like granite. This exposure resulted in numerous monumental sculptures in Kenya and outside the country, which can withstand unfavourable weather and other environmental challenges unlike wood or soapstone.

Mzee, as I preferred calling him, was always up to date with new technologies and trends. He was super-fast in typing and very efficient in proposal and letter writing. His diverse knowledge was a marvel to many who were always wondering how he could devise and improvise a system that would work perfectly.

One of the institutions he founded was the ELKOM museum, the first museum to operate in Kisii, bringing to the world's attention how creativity can take you places. The community has also been able to benefit from the museum, as it enabled people to connect with their culture through ancient artifacts and both written and audiovisual history kept in its collections. The Museum is currently undergoing re-structuring to enable it continue its operations...this time without Elkana.

We hope to keep his spirit alive, and are very hopeful that this story will impact people and continue adding wood to the fire that brought warmth when 'Mzee' Elkana, my Dad, was still here with us.

Postscript: Samson Mogendi Ong'esa tragically passed on in November 2025 after a fatal car crash. We are publishing this posthumously to honour his memory, and that of his father, Elkana Ong'esa. May their souls rest in eternal peace, and may the stones that spoke to them never go silent.

Living in The Legend's Shadow - Tribute to Samson Mogendi Ongaki Ong'esa

David Omingo Oendo

Significant moments define character. Working with Samson Mogendi Ongaki Ong'esa has been an inspiring journey - one marked by patience, quiet determination, and an unwavering focus on achieving the objectives set before him. Among skilled practitioners, there is an adage that "two cooks cannot boil the same pot". Elkana Mweri Ong'esa and Samson Mogendi Ongesa were both accomplished artists in their own right, yet they belonged to two distinct eras. This reality often placed the younger artist in a supporting, back-room role.

However, in April 2025, Samson the artist stepped decisively onto the main stage, taking to the moment like a duck to water. This turning point came with the rehabilitation and repositioning of the large, heavy sculptures that had long lain in disarray at the entrance of the ELKOM Museum. He was extremely passionate about his work which he approached with remarkable commitment. Despite severely limited resources, the work was executed to near perfection.

Today, the enduring presence of works by various international sculptors, displayed in their current settings for many years, stands as a powerful testament to Samson's creativity, vision, and artistic leadership at the ELKOM Museum.

"Engo igo ekweibora."

David Omingo Oendo is Acting CEO, ELKOM Museum



Visual Art as Social Commentary: A Note

Kimani Njogu

Art is socially conditioned but carries, within it, relative autonomy. The degree to which an artist's work speaks to events in society is dependent, in my view, on the artist's desire to consciously link their creative work with the social struggles in society. The artist's political and philosophical ideas are integrated in the creation of a work of art to build coherence between aesthetic intent and interpretation of social events. It is this intersection of content and form that can help us appreciate

Elkana Ong'esa's visual art in pursuit of a peaceful and just nation. He was not alone. Elkana worked within the context of other Kenyan visual artists who had a similar curiosity about what art could do. Sane Wadu, a contemporary, was born in 1954, and started his painting career in 1983. A teacher by profession, Wadu wanted to be free. He was called 'crazy' by people who saw him as 'insane' for forfeiting his teaching job to get into painting. Needing to make commentary about life and freely paint what he saw around him, he had chafed at the constraints to his creativity caused by the classroom setting with its strict curriculum. It was in oils and canvas that he eventually found this freedom. A founder member of the Ngecha Artists' Association, he has over the years provided moral and technical support to artists on the outskirts of Nairobi. When I met him last in Nakuru, he was still painting and mentoring.

Samwel Wanjau, the sculptor who carved gunstocks for freedom fighters in the early 1950s was born in 1936 in Nyeri, the heart of the resistance movement led by the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), otherwise referred to as 'Mau Mau'. Having dropped out of school, Wanjau joined a canvas cooperative, first in Mombasa, and then later in Gikomba before settling at the City Market, both in Nairobi. I met him there selling carvings in the mid-1980s when I was a student at the University of Nairobi.

In the 1960s, Wanjau had exhibited at the Paa Ya Paa Arts Centre, under the leadership of Elimo Njau, the master of canvas and clay who was born in 1932 in Tanzania. Wanjau was Paa ya Paa's first artist-in-residence in 1969. He left the Centre a powerful stone figure, "Freedom Fighter" a constant reminder that art has the responsibility of keeping memory alive. This commitment to art that Samwel Wanjau embraced continues in the work of his son, Jackson Wanjau, the talented sculptor. Then there was Patrick Mukabi (1969-2026) popularly referred to as 'Panye' by his students and admirers. He is the artist who memorialized the 1998 bombing of the US Embassy in Nairobi. On Friday August 7, 1998 at 10.30 am, I was on the queue at the Embassy with my son, waiting to get into the Embassy when the place exploded and I saw darkness. Mukabi—the Founder of Kids Create Kenya—used his art to capture the national anguish experienced due to the terror attack.

Patrick Kayako, the visual artist from Kendu Bay born in 1971 sees life as a struggle. His painting "Man Struggles Man" captures his overall approach to the political, economic and social tensions he sees in society. Through colors on canvas, he abstracts the reality he sees and with immense precision, detail, and care, deploys his imagination on canvas. His inspiration comes from the works of Joel Oswaggo and Jak Katarikawe, the Ugandan-born painter.

Without doubt, Ong'esa's world was populated by artists commenting about social and political events. Whether it is in the works of Kioko Mwitiki of Kajiado, Rosemary Karuga, Vincent Soi, Mazola wa Mwashigadi, or indeed Paul Abwao (1960-2026)—who was commissioned by the Jahazi Editorial Board to give us the cover, 'Guinea Fowls', for Jahazi Vol. 6 of 2017 on *Reflections on Culture, Arts and the Constitution of Kenya*—visual artists in Kenya have served to show the complexity of human life and the environment in which we live. Protecting artistic freedom, which is a constitutional guarantee in Kenya, is a responsibility we all must carry.

Elkana Ong'esa: In His own Words

Interview by James Gitaka, Journalist

JG: How did you become a visual artist?

Elkana: I was born in Tabaka village, Kisii County. Tabaka is world-famous for stone carvings and is home to a special stone called the 'Kisii Soapstone' which is used for making handicrafts for sale, locally and internationally. All male members of the community in the past were expected to do some stone carving. Therefore, I inherited some of these stone carving abilities and then, afterwards, perfected them a little more because I had the opportunity to study Fine Art at school.

JG: What was this stone referred to as in the local language?

Elkana: We call it *egware*. *Egware* is a soft stone that can be shaped into different objects. It was used for making carvings of functional items such as bowls and smoke pipes. It is also used for making figurines of animals and people. Unlike in many other communities where traditional crafts have died, been forgotten, or have gone down in value, the Kisii stone industry is still active despite the fact that it has been affected recently by a number of things. It has remained active and very important to the community and in the country especially through the export market. Recently women have taken up stone carving, expressing their own creative skills and making some very interesting things in the process.

JG: Why was carving the preserve of men?

Elkana: Because stone carving can be very demanding. Once you start working on something, you must finish it. It often means carving for many hours. This would be in conflict with other activities that women do, such as preparing food for the family, doing agricultural work, child care, bringing up children and so on. If they got very involved in stone carving they might be distracted so much that it may not be good for the family and the community. So it remained that women were barred from participating in it.

JG: Which items did you carve first?

Elkana: I started with fish and birds. My background of carving birds has remained permanent; even my biggest sculptures that I am doing currently are birds. I do other things like human figures, animals, elephants and things like that, but birds are most prevalent in my work. My greatest inspiration has come from birds and their lives, and their shapes, their colours, and so on. I am nicknamed '*Enyamuchera*', the beautiful fiscal shrike [*Lanius collaris*] which sings and dances beautifully! I did a sculpture of *Enyamuchera* from 1976 to 1978. It took two years to make the seven tonne sculpture. I did that for UNESCO Headquarters in Paris and it has been there for over forty years now. It was presented to UNESCO on 10th October 1978 by the newly sworn-in President Daniel Moi at a handover ceremony in Nairobi's Kenyatta International Conference Centre. That was the first big sculpture I did. *Enyamuchera* is a singing bird and it was supposed to represent peace. But the '*enyamuchera*' is very aggressive and protective; it cannot allow other birds to come near even if they are the big ones. It goes under the wings and starts fighting.

Another big sculpture is the Elephant Family which I did in 2014 to be shown as the centrepiece for the Smithsonian Cultural Festival in Washington DC. But it didn't leave the country. It was left at the National Museums of Kenya as public officers went to the Festival.

JG: Describe this Elephant Family.

Elkana: It is one sculpture, having the mother and the father and baby elephant in one stone. The stone was about 25 tonnes but we had to cut it to make it into a smaller size for purposes of transportation. It was now about 15 tonnes but still, they couldn't take it to Washington DC due to corruption. Corruption has killed the creative arts not only in sculpture and paintings but also in music and athletics.

JG: How has COVID affected your work?

Elkana: My spouse and I both fell ill and could only access treatment in the city of Eldoret, so we had to move there from Kisii. We relocated thinking that we were going to get better and return home to continue carving from here. But due to COVID- 19, particularly during the lockdown, I could not get my materials and tools from Kisii, until recently. I was stopped from going to Nairobi, which was out of reach for all Kenyans because of the lockdown. I had organised an exhibition; a unique exhibition in the sense that it was going to feature my work from when I was a small boy up until now. Some of the work, like the sculpture in Paris, would have to be displayed photographically. Same with the sculpture at the American Embassy in Nairobi, the biggest I have ever made. The exhibition was to have opened on Sunday 15th March 2020. But then due to COVID-19, public gatherings were banned. Museums, hotels and all those places of public gathering were closed down. We knew it was going to be very difficult to continue with the event although we had finished all preparations. It was extremely difficult for me as I had spent a lot of personal money to organise the event, with no outside sponsorship. So I lost the opportunity of a lifetime because that was going to be a panoramic exhibition of my life, bringing the very early pieces I did up to today. It was going to tell my story. In fact, that's what it was called - the *Story of My Life: Cast in Stone and Wood*. I missed it.

JG: How else has COVID-19 affected you?

Elkana: The losses resulting from the failed exhibition are emotional and material as well as social and economic. Then when I came here to Eldoret I struggled to get a place to live in and settle down. Some friends have been very kind, and have supported us in a big way, in terms of our medical bills. Our children have continually supported us despite getting worn out. Both of us are cancer patients. I've got three sisters with cancer, blood pressure and diabetes at very advanced stages. We all have pre-existing conditions that can make infection by the Coronavirus disastrous. So we are stuck here in this small compound. We can't move, and we have to look for someone to send to bring us food, fruits.

We had sold our car thinking we may sell one small sculpture and buy another car to help us when we are struggling like this, even to go to hospital. But everything went haywire and we've not sold any sculptures. I have had to start carving stones from here. I had to buy new tools and other things to start afresh because these are different types of rocks; they are harder. But then even if I make them, how do I sell them? I am too old to understand how they do it online; like those people have done it through social media and what do you call this thing, the online marketing thing. I could have done that but I need some people around to help me to do those things. They can't come here because I fear they will come with Corona. Even when you were coming we were debating: what do we do with this man coming to interview us? That's why we put you outside here in the open so that we can talk freely. We fear you, I can tell you!

JG: I understand. Coronavirus is real.

Elkana: It's real! So this Corona thing has tied us down on so many levels! Previously, I would have contacted many people, talked to them and offered them what I have made or what I have to sell. My other work is now at the National Museum in Nairobi. We are building a house here so that we can be near our doctors at Moi University Referral Hospital and other hospitals in Eldoret where we are being treated. Previously, I was being treated at Kenyatta National Hospital in Nairobi, but we cannot go there now.

JG: So the way of coping is building a new home here, nearer to your doctors?

Elkana: Yes. We have started doing that but we have to finish it so that it can be livable. The other

thing is at my age now, I wouldn't like to expose myself to anything, like this Coronavirus because I know I may not survive. I don't have that energy that will enable me to face these conditions. The immunity is so low.

JG: Are you now growing your own vegetables at home? Organic?

Elkana: Yes, so that we don't go to the market. We're doing the organic vegetables, you can see? These are the things we have started and we are going to do more. These plants are very useful. We have spinach here and we are growing traditional vegetables.

JG: What kind of preparation can artists engage in to continue to work in situations such as these?

Elkana: It depends on what they are doing, in their different professions. Performing Arts for example, what can they do? You can only dance online! If you know how to do it, you can use social media platforms. And those who are doing sculpture; how do you do it, my friend? It is so difficult. The Coronavirus has blocked even the transport systems. Even if you have something you have made and you want to sell it, how do you ship it? Right now I'm having a problem with shipping a piece which I want to sell so that I get money for my medicine, yet I cannot. But may I also say this: social media is proving to be very useful for certain artists.

JG: How can the government support local artists?

Elkana: The government can create the market within its system; in the government sectors. Let the private sector invest and give reports on how they are supporting artists. Let there be a way of making the private sector active in promoting the creative arts industries, my sculptures included.

JG: Do you have a phrase or saying that is close to you that summarizes everything about what you think about how things could be done?

Elkana: In this whole scenario, we need to be thinking about friendship. During the course of these challenges I've faced, it is close friends that have enabled us to be where we are today. Genuine friendship and care would make the world a better place for all of us.

