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**RELATIVITY OF INDIGENOUS EAST AFRICAN  
DESIGN CHAMPIONS: JACQUE NJERI, MARC VAN  
RAMPENBERG AND WAMBUI KAMIRU COLLYMORE**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper focused on the comparative qualities of contemporary design champions who are re-defining Kenyan design in various sub specialties. Their artworks represent where the creative economy (Design) is heading. Conducted in Nairobi, this study sought to exemplify contemporary design champions redefining East African creative scene. It applied a case study research methodology. The three cases were: Jacque Njeri, Marc van Rampelberg and Wambui Kamiru Collymore, all based in Kenya. The study gathered information through interviews, focus group discussions and desktop research. The focus group included erudite faculty, design stakeholders and students of the school of the arts and design. This was done through seminars and presentations. The comparative study results yielded various similarities than differences amongst the champions. The three champions of contemporary inclinations also represent the individualism in their expressions. The researcher discovered that their sense of individualism is what brought them together and is what makes them exemplify design trends today.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Contemporary design, Champions, Kenya, Design, Independence*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In his seminal treatise on "The role of champions in product innovation, Alok k Chakrabarti (1974) asserted that, the primary reasons for lack of innovation in design and in organizations are (1) inertia in putting forth the idea, (2) fear of criticism if the idea is offered, (3) feeling of futility about the likelihood that the idea will be well received or acted on, (4) lack of attention paid to the idea at early stages. Alok quotes Marvin Bower, Managing Director of McKinsey & company who advocated that successful innovation requires attention of the top management and a nurturing atmosphere. Alok (1974) further on the issue quotes Peterson. Quoting Peterson, Alok advances that "From his experience as the chief executive of Bell and Howell, Peter G. Peterson concluded that the following three conditions are necessary for successful innovations in an organization: (1) some amount of flexible structure is necessary for defining the problem and need of the client and the organization: (2) a minimum number of people to prevent mangling the idea: and (3) a moderate amount of humility toward intellectual ability is needed to generate some willingness to experiment with the creative idea".

Alok's analysis of both Bower's and Peterson's observation led to the point that new ideas-products or other innovations-require some kind of protective nurturing (Champions) before they become viable (Alok k Chakrabarti, 1974).

From the foregoing, it is important on all design projects that there are designated creative client champions, '...to take responsibility for design quality throughout the project. This may be the departmental champion with a responsibility for all

the organisation's design projects or an individual assigned the role specifically for the project Achieving Excellence Guide 9 (2007)

It can be appropriate to appoint a number of design champions:

- *A senior design champion might be appointed to ensure that schemes do not proceed until they achieve an acceptable level of design quality.*
- *A project-level design champion might become more involved in the detail of the design.*
- *Special interest champions, might represent the interests of particularly important aspects of the project.*

*Special interest design champions could be appointed to represent:*

- *Design quality.*
- *Client interests.*
- *Staff interests.*
- *Information technology.*
- *Change management.*
- *Sustainability.*
- *Facilities management.*

A soft landings champion to ensure the design optimizes operational performance and that there is a smooth transition from design to model to product.

The role of champions might include:

- *Articulating the vision for the project.*
- *Articulating the client's design quality aspirations.*
- *Ensuring that design objectives are clearly described in briefing documents.*

- *Evaluating design quality throughout the design process.*
- *Chairing user panels relevant to their particular area of responsibility.*

**It is important that design champions are appointed as soon as possible so that they can play a part in establishing the vision for the project. This will make them more likely to defend the vision.**

**The three contemporary design champions featured showcase an array of present-day productions of east African design. All of them practice in Kenya, an east African country; leading in new ways of showcasing the creative economy in a new light. They are considered champions due to their outstanding prowess, processes and productions that captivate many. They are refreshing in their approach to design. Decisively, they include Jacque Njeri, Marc van Rampelberg and Wambui Kamiru Collymore.**

## **THEORY**

**Their individual creative design processes are discussed below.**

### **JACQUE NJERI**

**Jacque Njeri is a Kenyan Graphic designer who creates artworks stimulated by the African perspective. She graduated from the University of Nairobi with a B.A. Design in 2013. Her design series 'Maasci' led her to global recognition leading her work to be featured by British Broadcasting Corporation and Cable News Network. According to Africultures (2019), the series was also featured at the Other Futures conference in Amsterdam. Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic, philosophy of science, and philosophy of history that explores the developing intersection of African Diaspora culture with technology (Dery,1993). She describes her work as afro-futurism;**

**the African experience being told from an African perspective and the African experienced re-imagined from an African lens.**

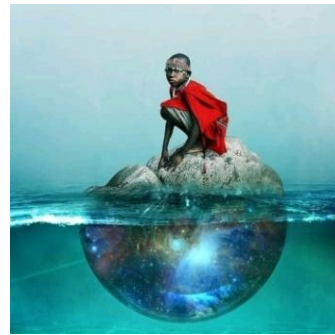
### **Maa Sci Series**

**In this series, Jackie was inspired by Star Wars' futuristic approach and rough textures to tell the story of the Maasai in space. The play on word 'Maa-sci' represents Maasai; The Nilotic community located in Northern Tanzania, Southern and central Parts of Kenya, and sci-fi; the film genre that focuses on science fiction and imaginative story lines with advanced technology and humanistic approaches such as societies, genetic capabilities and forms of governance. The series reflects the placement of the Maasai people in Tatooine city- a fictional sparsely inhabited desert planet from the movie series star wars. They are depicted in their traditional mode of dressing and applying their culture. From an interview with Quarts Africa (2017), she states that she would wish to change the image portrayed of Africa in the media and she wishes to take back the story telling power and showcase Africans in a victorious manner. Previously, scenes and stories of futurism and sci-fi barely had black people or any other race other than Caucasian as casts or as real life participants in space exploration. From her interview with Design Indaba (2018), she further elaborates the need to seek social progression through the application of technological advancement. The images are captivating due to the juxtaposition of African culture and science fiction in a way that makes the viewer challenge themselves. It leads to questions such as; why shouldn't the Maasai exist in a world of Sci-fi? The misrepresentation of African peoples in such narratives leads to the awe of the visuals (Design Indaba, 2018).**

Njeri has managed to start a new approach to futuristic approach of East African design where the results are not as predictable and the results are also those that captivate and challenge the normalcy of misrepresentation and total exclusion of Africans from supernatural stories. The retention of the Maasai culture is also deliberate in eliminating the narrative that African perspectives are backward and regressive. The design captures the co-existence of African identity and futuristic theories. Figure 1, represents Maasai women representation in positions of leadership such as leading in space exploration as astronauts. The vibrant Maasai colours in contrast with the rough neutral coloured terrain creates clear focal points and visual contrast that makes the imagery even more captivating and vibrant. The reflective aqua colours in Figure 2 emphasizes the sci-fi feel and brings forth a feeling of surrealism and freshness.



**Fig1: She- story- female Astronaut; MaaSci**  
**Source: [www.qz.com](http://www.qz.com)**



**Fig2: Maasci series**  
**Source: [www.qz.com](http://www.qz.com)**



**Fig 3: Maasai men riding space ship**  
**Source: [www.designindaba.com](http://www.designindaba.com)**



**Fig 4: Maasci series**  
**Source: [www.designindaba.com](http://www.designindaba.com)**

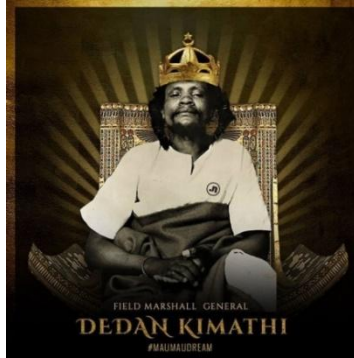


From an interview with the Design Indaba (2018), Njeri describes how figure three represents Maasai men in their traditional regalia in a supernatural setting has been a missing narrative in the works of sci-fi. She further emphasizes that the use of traditional subject such as figure 4 in these kinds of narratives elevates African art and gives Africans representation in areas they have been excluded from. Njeri sees a futuristic Africa with the retention of the rich culture of the Maasai people.

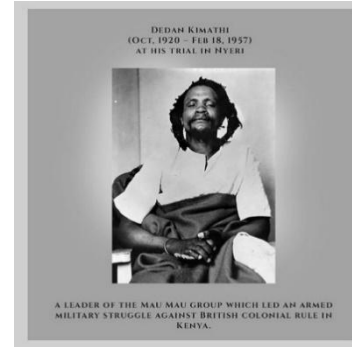
### **The Mau Mau Dream Series**

The Mau Mau Uprising (1952–1960), also known as the Mau Mau Rebellion, the Kenya Emergency, and the Mau Mau Revolt, was a war in the British Kenya Colony (1920–1963) between the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), also known as Mau Mau, and the British colonists (Blakeley, 2009). Africultures (2019) assesses the work as a journey back in time and re-imagining the Mau Mau and independence heroes in a present day context. She edits iconic imagery to achieve an aristocratic and regal appearance of Jomo Kenyatta, Dedan Kimathi and Waruhiu Itote. She is successful in the depiction of the icons with character and dignity as seen in figure 5. Most of the imagery represented in the archival media is of the leaders in capture; either during their hearings or in handcuffs in colonial government custody. In figure 5, Njeri recreates the iconic photograph (figure 6) of the captured Dedan Kimathi to give him an aristocratic appearance and persona. The image carries shades of brown and gold which echo modernity and royalty. The image used for the series is an iconic image that was released by the British colonial government to assure the public of his capture and it was used as government records for filing. The colonial government's intent to intimidate the movement and tame the charged indigenous

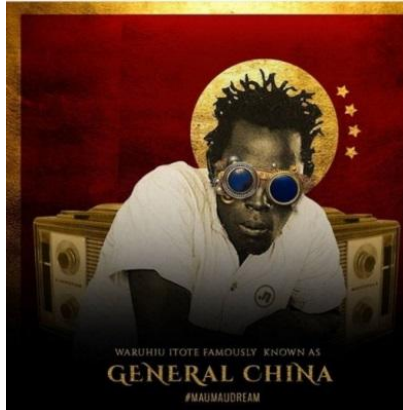
public through imagery and Njeri's approach of re-affirming the aristocratic image of the fallen hero is an evidence of how important it is for Africans to share their perspectives of their culture.



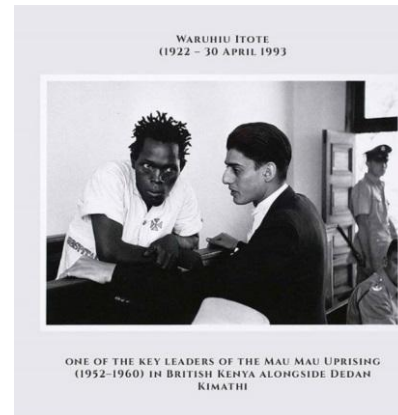
**Fig 5: Mau Mau dream; 'King Mathi'**  
Source: [www.Instagram.com](http://www.Instagram.com).



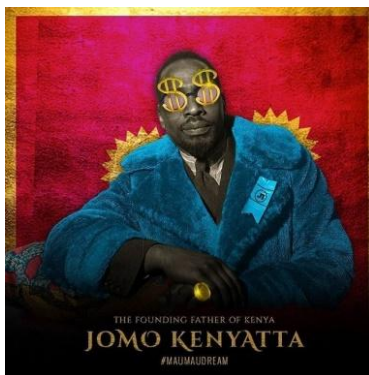
**Fig 6: A captured Dedan Kimathi**  
Source: [www.Instagram.com](http://www.Instagram.com)



**Fig 7: Mau Mau dream; General China**  
Source: [www.Instagram.com](http://www.Instagram.com)



**Waruhiu Itote**  
Source: [www.Instagram.com](http://www.Instagram.com)



**Fig 9: Mau Mau dream; Kenyatta**  
Source: [www.Instagram.com](http://www.Instagram.com).



**Fig 10: Young Jomo Kenyatta**  
Source: [www.Instagram.com](http://www.Instagram.com)

The Mau Mau surge was fueled by the increased agitation of Africans from the invasion of Europeans. The colonialists, according to

**Newsinger (2017), had displaced over 120, 000 kikuyus into reserves that were infested with poverty, diseases and deplorable living conditions. The push for reclamation of the land and freedom had become a matter of life and death of the continuity of the Agikuyu community. The revolt against the unfair treatment by the colonial government led to the emergence of great leaders who are highlighted in the series. The two generals featured; Dedan Kimathi and General Waruhiu represent the foot soldiers who abandoned usual life to manifest the greatest guerrilla warfare in Kenya. Dedan Kimathi died in 1957 for the great cause and his grave is yet to be traced till this day Kejitan, (2019).**

**Dedan Kimathi remains as an iconic figure not only to the Agikuyu community but to the whole nation of Kenya. The iconic imagery of Dedan Kimathi has been captured on printed material such as screen-printed T- shirts, street art and on a statue that stands in the central business district at the junction of Kimathi Street and Mama Ngina Street.**

**General Waruhiu Itote, also known as General China, is an iconic Mau Mau general who got the chance to experience Kenya post-independence. David (2005) describes Itote as a powerful organiser and oath administrator of the Mau Mau. He led Mau Mau soldiers to settler territory in Nyeri though he was eventually captured in 1954. The image used in the series, that is figure 7 currently copyrighted by Magnun photos, shows Waruhiu in court together with his lawyer, Saeed Cockar during his trial in the same year he was captured. He was arrested and later in prison interacted with Jomo Kenyatta; they forged a relationship after Itote saved Kenyatta's life from an attempted stabbing by Kariuki Chotara. After independence, he was appointed as the assistant director of the National Youth Service up**

to 1984. He supervised farm work in Ol Kalau before his death in 1993.

Itote has been branded a traitor to the movement because he negotiated a deal to assist the colonial government in exchange of his life after being arrested. Blumenkrantz (1993) eulogizes Itote clarifying that Itote did not compromise the Mau Mau movement but rather he wrote letters to its leaders pleading for their retreat in order to save his life. He explains that some of the leaders such as Kimathi received the letters with fury, General Mathenge was seemingly neutral and a handful of Kikuyu leaders empathised with the captured leader.

Njeri's imagery of Itote represents personality through the addition of trendy sunglasses. She converts a moment of life and death into a relaxed and poised moment representing the young Itote as fashion forward and artistic in figure 7. The imagery represents what young Kenyans, especially those from the Mount Kenya region, did not get to experience due to the oppression they endured from the colonialists and the prioritisation of Independence from their oppressors through joining Mau Mau. Njeri describes her design of Itote's photograph on her Instagram account as reminiscent of the popular Jamaican musician Shaba Ranks; she transformed the historical moment into contemporary graphic design as seen in figure 9.

Jomo Kenyatta was the first president of Kenya. He was born Kamau wa Muigai in the 1890's. Kenyatta then took the name Kamau wa Ngengi (Archer, 1969) after his father died because his mother was inherited by his uncle Ngengi. He later changed his name to Jomo Kenyatta. He was an anti-colonial icon that concocted a balance between politics and activism. Though controversial, He was able to

participate as the Kenya Central Association as its secretary, precarious of Colonialists' temperaments, he handled his role with caution. He was observant and strategic; as stated by the African American Registry, he was a part of the young Africans that formed the Pan African Association according to Evans, (2019)

Other than his publications such as Muigwithania, he was a part of the Kapenguria six alongside Bildad Kaggia, Achieng' Oneko, Paul Ngei, Kung'u Karumba and Fred Kubai. Though Kenyatta's role in Mau Mau are obscure; according to the History website, Jomo Kenyatta played very little role despite being arrested along the other nationalists. Njeri depicts Kenyatta as a young carefree youth in a trendy furcoat and jewellery in figure. Her depiction is not as far reaching as the other two depictions due to Kenyatta's flamboyance in the original picture. The researcher synthesizes the imagery of the series to be trendy and representative of modern graphic design with an Afro-futuristic approaches. The work can be seen to be successful in its depiction of the icons in a new light. The designer captures good use of colour and form to generate graphic imagery that is impressive and creative.

### **The Genesis series**

Jacque Njeri explores the origins of the Agikuyu and Mumbi daughters and re-imagines them in an afro-futuristic setting. She shows the genesis of the Agikuyu community and the series also brings out the roles of the individual clans in the society. Every Kikuyu states that the clans of the tribe are nine, but at the same time he enumerates ten names. Some of them will be unable to explain their incoherency: somebody else says: "Meherega ne kenda eyoire" -The clans are nine with the fill: - what explains the whole

thing. The number ten is complete, and if they said plainly that the clans are ten, they would feel as they omened the end of the tribe. They result therefore to a paraphrase (Cagnolo, 1933).

The costumes and colour selections in the series are reminiscent of the regalia of the traditional Agikuyu women; the presence of the brown colours and metallic accessories. The designer describes the series as a modern futuristic interpretation of a matriarch inspired by the Gikuyu myth of origin. The eldest daughter of Gikuyu and Mumbi, Wanjiru, is the matriarch of the Anjiru clan. She is depicted in figure 14 as the fore seer and prophet. The third daughter, Wacera aka Njeri is the matriarch of the Acera clan: She is depicted as the smooth talker and the traveller in figure 13. The fifth daughter, Nyambura in figure 12 is the matriarch of the Ambura clan and the rainfall and atmosphere controller. While the lastborn daughter, Wangui in figure 11 is the matriarch of the musical clan Angui. Njeri believes in empowering young Africans with skills sufficient for them to be in charge of their future and heal negative ideas and notions regarding Africa. The other Gikuyu daughters that have not been mentioned in the series include Wambui, Wangari, Wakiuru, Wangeci, Wairimu and Wamuyu.

The colour scheme applied by Njeri is similar to the original regalia of the Agikuyu. The noted difference includes choice of fabric; the imagery captures the matriarchs in shiny fabric as noted by Gikuyu Documentation Centre in Mukurwe-ini (2018)



**Fig 11: Wangui; the music matriarch**  
**Source: [www.Instagram.com](http://www.Instagram.com)**



**Fig 12: Nyambura; rainfall controller**  
**Source: [www.Instagram.com](http://www.Instagram.com)**



**Fig 13: Wacera; the traveller**  
**Source: [www.Instagram.com](http://www.Instagram.com)**



**Fig 14: Wanjiru; the foreseer**  
**Source: [www.Instagram.com](http://www.Instagram.com)**

## **MARC VAN RAMPELBERG**

According to an interview with the researcher (2019), Marc Van Rampelberg was born in Belgium in 1949 and was raised in middle-class post-war poverty Belgium. The name Rampelberg coincidentally means the curve at the beginning of a mountain; which defines his curvilinear style. Marc was discouraged from training as an artist despite the fact that he was very skilled in

**solving design problems for family and friends. He opted to study teaching. The desire for adventure led him to Kenya, Sudan, Egypt and Zaire. He stayed in Africa volunteering as a teacher for six years before he went back to Europe. While in Europe, he worked as an apprentice for renowned Belgian sculptor Rik Poot. In Rampelberg (2001), he narrates how he learnt about 3-dimensional art from Poot. He learnt about the lost wax technique and bronze casting. He also opted to do a lot of side jobs at theatres; assisting with set design and prop design as well. Marc came back to Africa, settling in Kenya in 1980. There he met his wife Chelenge, a Kenyan sculptor. They have three children together; Rosie, Naomi and Rik.**

**Rampelberg (2001) describes how he worked in Kenya as a French teacher, making furniture on the side. Soon enough, he created a client base making one of a kind designs. He rented space out in Industrial area where he created a collection that he show cased at Goete Institute. In Githuku (2017), Rampelberg states that his designs are reminiscent of natural forms though he doesn't wish to directly mimic nature rather his curves are mimicry of geometry.**

**During his interview with the researcher, he describes his work as minimalistic. "My work may share the curve with the Art Deco style, not however the serpentine curve. My curves are more geometric in nature; like a circle. The geometric shapes are combined together to create various forms." "Moreover, my designs are stripped of any applied decoration. Look at that (points to a stool as seen in figure 14) I want the volume to speak through a line which draws its inspiration from geometrical shapes." He describes his inspiration as without a doubt the human body, particularly the female form. Marc clarifies during the interview that he grew up during the Art Deco era in Europe so it is possible that these visions subconsciously**



rubbed up on him, though his intent is to create minimalistic works as seen on figure 15.

During the interview with the researcher, Marc emphasizes that his creations are timeless pieces that capture simplistic natural beauty. His work is striking as it captures African aesthetics and Western ideals at the same time. His work is a unique interpretation of East African design, even though he was not born here. His team comprise of East Africans. Marc is a firm believer that local wood should be harvested and consumed by local designers other than the prioritization of foreign markets. He believes that this will improve the quality of products and control reforestation of the cut down trees. He imports majority of his timber from Congo.



**Fig 14: Bar stool**

**Source: The researcher**



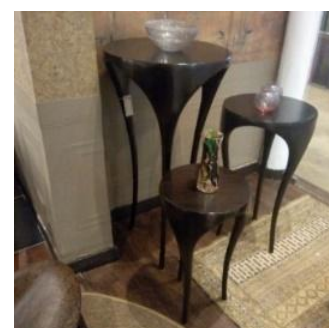
**Fig15: Side stool**

**Source: The researcher**



**Fig 16: Items in Ruaraka reception store**

**Source: The researcher**



**Fig17: Iconic side stools in village market**

**Source: The researcher**



**Fig 18: Display in village market store**

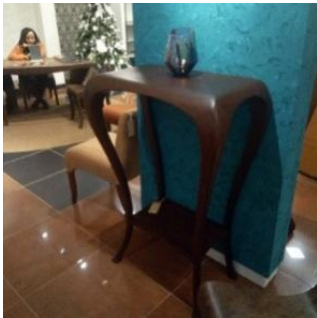
**Source: The researcher**

**Rampel designs represent a Kenyan brand that would flourish as a high-level production company with the right policies in place. It is to place machines, tools, accessories, labourers and raw materials in the process at the right place (Treesat, 2002) The designs showcase how diverse and unique contemporary design is in Kenya as seen in figure 16 and 17; yet most contemporary designers are facing similar challenges.**

**From a site visit made by the researcher in 2019, Rampel designs is currently located in Ruaraka where they have a go down workshop where they make the furniture as seen on figure 16. There are offices and a showroom as well. The space is perfect for their activities and their machinery is quite impressive. They have one large machine that slices the large timber pieces and two band saws that slice the smaller pieces. In one godown, there is the large slicing machine where carpenters prepare the large pieces and carpenters polishing complete furniture pieces with natural wax. In an adjacent go-down, the researcher observed carpenters slicing small pieces of wood and others smoothening the furniture pieces. The second go-down also has a lot of joinery being done. The first floor of the second go down has Marc's office, a reception area with his secretary Mary, who has worked for him since he started Rampel**

designs in 1987. There is also a large show room with attractive furniture arrangement.

The researcher visited the village market store. It showcases the array of furniture in the various designs as seen on figure 18. The store is managed by an attendant. Furniture pieces have price tags; with pieces ranging from Ksh.870, 000 (8,430\$) to Ksh. 178,000 (13,484\$). The pieces are well displayed as seen on figure 19 and 20. The main clients are locals and expatriates. The designs have the signature curvilinear look even when upholstered as seen in figure 21 and figure 22



**Fig 19: Display in village market**

**Source: The researcher**



**Fig 20: Furniture display**

**Source: The researcher**



**Fig 21: Sofa design in village market**

**Source: The researcher**



**Fig 22: Seat design**

**Source: The researcher**

## **Design process of the furniture**

**Marc describes the design process to the researcher as a simplified process with very little machinery. The designs start from a sketching process with relevant notes then developed drawings and 1/1 templates are made by Marc himself. Then a skilled foreman works with the 1/1 templates to come up with a silhouette as seen on figure 25. The carpenter cuts the large pieces using the machine as seen in figure 23. The small mosaic pieces are also further cut by the band saw as seen on figure 24.**

**The next step involves refinement and smoothing of the curved-out furniture as seen on figure 24. After the various parts are refined as seen on figure 27, they are joined together and refined further as seen on figure 28. Soon enough the bespoke piece is complete and it is polished using natural wax as seen on figure 29. Marc elaborates during the interview that he has received better results by paying the carpenters a monthly salary than paying them per piece. The carpenter works on each piece by himself from start to finish for accountability and a sense of attachment.**

**Marc believes in empowering his staff and he ensures that human dignity is never compromised upon. He states that "Dignity is the biggest thing". He believes that a large part of his success has been his ability to keep a great team. Rampel designs enjoys a large and very exclusive client base; he has worked with Safaricom on the CEO's desk, the presidential suit at Serena Hotel and the mercury lounge at the ABC among others.**



**Fig 23: Large cutting tool pieces**  
**Source: the researcher**



**Fig 24: Carpenter using band saw for small pieces**  
**Source: the researcher**



**Fig 25 Making the frame**  
**Source: the researcher**



**Fig 26: joining the mosaic pieces to create a shape**  
**Source: the researcher**



**Fig 27: Refining the shape**  
**Source: the researcher**



**Fig 28 Assembly of the various pieces**  
**Source: the researcher**



**Fig 29: Polishing the furniture with wax**  
**Source: the researcher**

## **WAMBUI WAMAE KAMIRU- COLLYMORE**

**According to Githuku (2017), Wambui Kamiru is an installation artists and founder of the Arts Space. She graduated from Oxford University with a masters in African studies. She is a leader in the installation industry; having set up successful installations at Kuona Trust, Arts Space amongst other large exhibition spaces. Installation art is an artistic genre that showcases three-dimensional art that transforms the perception of a space. These set ups are applied to interior design to convey an image or send a message. The media used are experimental and bold; they are usually cross media and may involve sensors, which plays on the reaction to the audience’s movement when looking at the installations. By using virtual reality as a medium, immersive virtual reality art is probably the most deeply interactive form of art (Nechvatal, 2009).**

**#Your name betrays you series**

According to an interview she had with figure studios in 2015, this series was born after a famous Kenyan politician told a journalist that his name betrays him because of the question he asked during a press briefing. The collection was in honour of Terrance Ranger, a personal friend who passed away. Terrance believed that the categories Africans place themselves in were instigated by colonialists. She initially tried painting boxes but the boxes fell apart; so she got cabinets from Odds n Ends that were in vibrant colours. She then painted them black and white because of the symbolism of categorising people and each compartment has writings of stereotypes given to various communities as seen in figure 31 and figure 33.

There are forty compartments in total each representing a different tribe. There was very little grey area on the installation with the intent to capture how there is usually very little gradient when stereotyping people. Wambui says during the interview with figure studios, " I want people to walk in to this exhibitions and to ask themselves the difficult questions, I want them to ask themselves what their stereotypes are, who fed them those stereotypes and in what ways that they are giving life to those stereotypes."

Large chair is the structure that is believed to have formed cultural distinction and tribalism forming how people should be for a tribe. There is also a projector, showing historical imagery of the colonialists addressing the indigenous peoples. There is also a book on a desk with the title 'Kenya burning' as seen on figure 30. This references the extremities that have been experienced due to the use of tribalism to categorize people in Kenya. The book Kenya Burning is a compilation of the aftermath of the 2007 general elections held in Kenya. The Prestige bookshop website highlights

that the compilation features graphics by Yasuyoshi Chiba and Boniface Mwangi. It was published by the Go down Arts Centre. Wambui also uses tags on each cabinet drawer; to represent the various tribes.

Githuku (2017) analyses Wambui's exploration of the origin of ethnicity using current literature on the invention of culture and tradition. The exhibition received raving reviews when it was showcased at the Kuona Trust. Wambui remains a leader in this genre and her expressions continue to challenge the way we think and interact with our space and environment. In the installation, there were whispering sounds that represent how stereotypes are gossip material to compartmentalize human behaviour in a way that does not fully represent the victim of the whispers. The imagery of Kenya pre colonialism is projected on a screen, giving a glimpse of how the various peoples were as the stereotypes were being initially formulated.

In an interview with Kass International (2015), Wambui explains how explorers who first visited Kenya described Maasai as hostile and nomads, later on when the missionaries came to Kenya, they referred to the explorers' description thus categorised the Maasai as hostile and don't like education. When the colonial government settled in Kenya, they gave Maasai men the role of being guards due to the notion that the Maasai would be brave in that role and also because of the stereotype that the Maasai had no liking education, the colonialists thought that the Maasai will not bother them all the time asking for a job. These stereotypes have been solidified years later, and unfortunately, have influenced the trajectory of opportunities for some people in this community. Wambui clarifies that the stereotypes typed on the write ups in the drawers are not



her own stereotypes but a collection of stereotypes that she collected from interviews and from the internet. In her interview with Kass International (2015), Wambui challenges us to evaluate stereotypes before applying the impressions to be true.

Wambui applied minimalism in her installations by using simplistic furniture designs as seen on figure 32. The chairs have simple geometric lines and are in black, white and beige. Wambui also ensures that there is use of dominance through the use of the large chair and the application of unity through colour scheming and the similarity of the geometric silhouettes. The setup has an appropriate scale except for the intentionally large seat. Installation art can be associated with interior design; Installations are achieved by applying interior design despite the fact that the end products are more expressional than functional. Her chosen genre is indeed effective and multi-dimensional, just like any other creative form.



**Fig 30: Kenyan burning on the table**  
**Source: Visual Voices by Githuku**



**Fig 31: Wambui working on cabinets**  
**Source: Visual Voices by Githuku**



**Figure 32: Kenyan burning on the table**  
**Source: Visual Voices by Githuku**



**Figure 33: The cabinets with tags**  
**Source: Visual Voices by Githuku**

## **# Harambee 63**

**In 2003, Wambui created an experimental installation on Pan Africanism, Harambee 63 at Kuona Trust, Nairobi, where her studio was based. It was also shown at the University of Wits, South Africa (2014), the Trapholt museum of Modern Art, Denmark (2016). Harambee 63 (# Harambee 63) places the period of independence, specifically 1960-1963 as a key marker of the global movement against the oppression of coloured and black people (Githuku, 2017).**

**Wambui captures how the liberation of Kenya from the British was not a sole effort but rather, the mood of black people around the world was unilateral. The series demonstrated how the activities here in Kenya towards colonial freedom, such as the Mau Mau movement, was a part of the puzzle to the larger problem. The installation set up captures a recreational space of a bar area. The set-up of the bar as seen on figure 35 is intentional because this space was the key interactive point for black people, other than religious spaces, where they could have open conversations about politics without worrying over the preying eye of their oppressors (Githuku, 2017).**

**Most of these bars were not fancy at all, but they were places of solace and a place that black people could claim as their own. The installation also features sixty three gumboots, each with a stencil of an iconic figure who contributed to the liberation of black people during colonisation in Africa. The imagery varies a lot, including African leaders and leaders from other continents. During an interview with David Kamiru, Wambui states that she used**

**gumboots because gumboots are tools of resistance; in South Africa, they were used by the miners and they created a coded language of tapping the boots, one leg on the other, as a means of communication in the dark caves and as defiance as they were restricted from talking to one another (figure 36). The second reason is because gumboots were developed for war fare, in Europe, the Duke of Wellington had developed these gumboots during the battle of Waterloo where he defeated Napoleon as recorded in the History website**

**The third reason is because in African guerrilla warfare, the soldiers usually do not afford the appropriate uniforms, so they use gumboots instead. Using graphic stencils and video, Harambee63 introduced 63 faces of the global war against racial oppression that happened most extensively over a period of five years – in the period leading to Kenya's independence in 1963. The faces represented include Angela Davis, Robert Mugabe, Che Guevara, Mahatma Gandhi, Miriam Makeba, Patrice Lumumba, Muammar Gaddafi, Martin Luther King Jr, Frantz Fanon, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti amongst others as seen on figure 34**

**The sixty-three faces are used to show Kenya did not become decolonised through sole efforts. According to World History project, in May 1893, while Gandhi was on his way to Pretoria, a white man objected to Gandhi's presence in a first-class carriage, and he was ordered to move to the van compartment at the end of the train. Gandhi, who had a first-class ticket, refused, and was thrown off the train at Pietermaritzburg. Shivering through the winter night in the waiting room of the station, Gandhi made the momentous decision to stay on in South Africa. He stayed in South Africa for twenty one**

**years, preparing for the liberation of his people in India from British colonisation. He influenced other Indians such as Jawaharlal Nehru who later became the first president of India. Nehru's efforts inspired Kwame Nkrumah, who became the first Ghanaian president and a strong influence of Pan African culture that fueled leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta and Mau Mau leaders.**

**The Mau Mau revolution inspired leaders such as Fidel Castro and Malcom X. One of the most popular quotes by Malcom X includes, 'We are African, and we happened to be in America. We're not American. We are people who formerly were Africans who were kidnapped and brought to America.' And 'We need a Mau Mau in Alabama, We need a Mau Mau in Mississippi.' Through the bravery of the civil rights movement, that Malcom X was a part of, John F Kenedy passed Affirmative action laws that give equal rights to African Americans. Che Guevara also visited Africa to learn more about Guerilla warfare. A year before his fateful Bolivia mission, Che Guevara led a group of guerrillas to support the Congolese liberation movement in 1965 (Galvez &Guevara, 1999). Artists such as Josephine Baker and Miriam Makeba, who sang Aluta Continua dedicating the song to Samora Machel played a key role in motivating the revolutions. A total of seventeen countries attained independence in the 1960's Rosenberg, (2018).**



**Fig 34: Stencils of the revolutionaries**  
**Source: Githuku (2017)**



**Fig 35: The installation**  
**Source: www.wambuikamiru.com**



**Fig 36: The stencil gumboots. Source: www.youtube.com**

## FINDINGS

From the findings, the researcher concluded that that the contemporaries share individualism in common and the desire to create excellent forms applying themes that are close to them. The champions also expressed themselves in a well thought through

process. They have infused a contemporary angle into artifactual cultures of the east visual language.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **SIMILARITIES AMONGST THE CONTEMPORARY CHAMPIONS**

The application of contemporary design ties all the champions together; the use of what is present and relevant whilst maintaining their own individuality. Wambui's installation Harambee 63, applied stencilling, which is a contemporary application here in Kenya; as seen on Matatu art and t-shirts. Rampelberg applies minimalistic approach to his designs; sticking to monochromatic colour schemes and geometrical patterns. Njeri's art work in the Mau Mau series emulates contemporary visions for past leaders, by applying jewellery in her graphics that resemble what would be worn by the youths of the current time. They all approach contemporary design in a refreshing manner; all seemingly pioneers and champions of individualism.

They have all referenced the past in their executions. In order to move forward, you have to reference the past. The contemporaries have gone back in time; Wambui and Njeri have referenced Kenya's independence journey while Rampelberg describes his reference to the past to the researcher as 'Art Deco was all around me when I was growing up; if it did rub on to my creations now, I would not be surprised though it was not intentional'. The productions seem nostalgic of the past and mirror the need to learn from it. They have all expressed the need to preserve what is identifiable as Kenyan in the creation of new approaches.

The contemporaries have managed to create individualism that has led to making the practice a financially viable experience. Wambui has showcased her artwork across the globe and according to an interview she had with Kass international, she was able to secure a grant from Kuona trust for her installation, your name betrays you. Njeri has an active account on behance where she has displayed her work for purchase. Her work has been showcased on the Kenyan Airways magazine, Msafiri.

Her designs have also been sold at Alliance Francaise in Nairobi, selling memorabilia wall art at around one hundred and fifty US dollars. Rampelberg's target market is the affluent who would afford his pieces though his approach is to make products that are valuable and durable as seen on figure 34. In an interview with the researcher, he states that his furniture pieces have been showcased not only in his studio in Ruaraka but also in Village market. He also expresses that he can just look at a piece of furniture and state 'This cannot be sold for less than such and such amount'



*Fig 37: Rocking chair. Source: The researcher*

The contemporaries also share their interest in improving the local creative economy. They all emphasize the need to improve the

industry through empowerment of artists and designers and the creation of policies and structures. According to Afrifutures (2019), Njeri believes in young artists taking their rightful place in the narration of African tales. In an interview with the researcher, Rampelberg iterates the need for proper government policies on the exportation of Kenyan hardwoods. He believes proper policies should be strategized in order to improve the sector and curb deforestation by creating organized reforestation and solving the local timber needs. Wambui, in an interview with Kass International, explains the need to look deep within our hearts to find out what instigates negative stereotypes and learn how we can remove ourselves from such inclinations in order to improve our country, thus creating a stable nation.

The contemporaries share similar application of elements and principles of design. Their works appear to have a pleasing balance and an intentional approach to unity. Wambui's stencilled gum boots and Njeri's Afro futuristic compositions all use human imagery; applying scale and proportion to achieve graphic design. The works also share the commonality of representing revolutionary figures in the liberation of Kenya. The two also share a distinct appreciation of the Mau Mau movement, referencing it as a part of the design inspiration. The furniture pieces used for #your name betrays you series applies the use of natural wood colours, reminiscent of Rampel's pieces. The furniture pieces also apply geometrical shapes; Rampel opting for curvy lines and Wambui opting to use straight lines.



## **DIVERGENCE AMONGST THE CONTEMPORARY CHAMPIONS**

The artists apply different media and forms in the execution of their work. Afro futurism is different from mosaic furniture design as it is different from installation art. Each method has its own set of design procedures and desired output. The contemporaries in essence are not bound in their creative identity.

The contemporaries vary in their production systems due to the simple fact that they are creating different merchandise. The consumable properties of Njeri's graphic imagery highly varies from the momentary installations executed by Wambui. Rampelberg creates hardwood furniture that can stand against the test of time, whereas Wambui creates to evoke emotions and thoughts for a given moment in time. Indeed their production strategies will vary to suit the intent of the final product and the desired lifespan of the tangible design

## **METHODS**

This paper forms a series of annual workshops and symposia on insights into the arts and design of east Africa. The workshops bring together faculty, students at masters and above and erudite stakeholders of east African art and design. Decisively, the papers form partial fulfillment of the requirement of the student's respective degree. Conducted in Nairobi, the study utilized desk research, focus group discussions and presentations. The methods used by the researcher to collect data include interviews, observation during site visits, reading books and desktop research. Results are presented in continuous prose due to the historical and qualitative nature of the research.

## **CONCLUSION**

**The comparative study of the three exemplars yielded more similarities than expected. The creative economy is so diverse yet very similar in its challenges and inward desires and intent. The three contemporaries are all trying out new approaches to creativity to solve everyday solutions. They all desire to create an income for themselves and those that work with them. Unity is a principle used in design to create oneness; contemporaries have managed to be a piece of a larger puzzle that unifies to create the image of the creative industry of our growing nation**

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