

Tuesday, 14 October
2008 [NAIROBI]

[About Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Advertise](#)

- [Home](#)
- [News Updates](#)
- [Shipping News](#)
- [Investment & Banking](#)
- [Economy](#)
- [Consumer Insight](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Infrastructure](#)
- [Agribusiness](#)
- [Tourism News](#)
- [Business Life](#)
- [Ideas & Debate](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Editorial](#)
- [Enterprise](#)
- [Special Report](#)
- [Budget 2008](#)
- [Manufacturing](#)
- [Nation Media](#)

Paa ya Paa rises again to give artistes a platform

Written by [Chris Kay](#)



Mrs Phillda Njau plays the piano.

Jonathan Kariara, Philip Ochieng', Rebecca Njau and on.

For Elimo, his place has been as the "father of art in East Africa". A renowned painter, sculptor and muralist, his work is on display throughout the Paa ya Paa grounds. But his spread stretches far wider. He recalls European travels, where his reputation secured him an exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute.

But it is his Christian faith that has been the dominant force behind his creative being. "Some artists avoid acknowledging Christ; they believe they will lose their identity in him." On the contrary, he says,



September 29, 2008: At the entrance, a mural declares "Temple of Culture" as one enters the world of the legendary Paa ya Paa Arts Centre, where for many decades, founder member Elimo Njau and his wife Phillda, have been at the heart of East African art.

Nestled in the leafy suburban Ridgeways, the artistic haven is a near 50-year project that began as Elimo's art studio in Nairobi's city centre in 1963, and was born as Paa ya Paa in 1965.

Paa ya Paa means "the antelope flying" and is symbolic of rising "to the higher realms of excellence, ethics and beauty" Elimo tells me.

The artists who have flown there read like a luminary roll call: Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Terry Hirst, Okot p'Bitek,



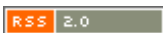
Revision of CISM sample questions in readiness for December 2008 ISACA examination.

For registration visit www.infosecact.com

SPONSORED LINKS

Buy NOW

Book Flights Online



- [Sponsored Links](#)
- [Airline](#)
- [Share Trading](#)
- [Banking](#)
- [Insurance](#)

Homeloans

“he empowers you.”

And he is disparaging of egotists. “Many artists and entertainers these days think they are demi-Gods.” He adds, “I want to encourage the spirit of self-sacrifice.” Is all good art linked with hard graft then? “You can have an inspired piece of art with little labour, and you can have a very well executed piece of art that is not very inspiring,” he counters.



e-paper
Subscribe to read at:

- US\$ 13.50- Monthly
- US\$ 38.00- Quartely
- US\$ 71.00- Half Yearly
- US\$ 132.00- Yearly

BUSINESS DAILY



BUSINESS DAILY
INNOVATE OR DIE

If anyone knows about the inspiring nature of Paa ya Paa, then it is his wife Phillda. Originally from New Jersey in the United States, she came to Kenya on a photographic assignment with the Presbyterian Church in 1969.

Her first impressions of East Africa were one of awe. “I thought “my God it is so beautiful”,” she says.

Evidently she was enthralled by both the picturesque surroundings and the artist hub that she embroiled herself in. “Paa ya Paa was very much a hotspot, it was more a cultural centre than a gallery.

Things happened there.” Part of its delight, she claims, was that with Elimo as the director the running of the gallery was “very spontaneous”. Paa ya Paa in essence “gave a platform for artists,” she adds.

And what began in the city centre only blossomed further in Ridgeways from the mid-Seventies. “We were very proud to have moved here. In the country people can reflect and meditate,” says Elimo.

“People come here to revitalise their visions... it is not cluttered with noise.” However, the infamous fire on December 8, 1997, nearly put the Njau’s life work into a terminal slumber. The fire managed to consume most of the art in and around the 100-year-old colonial house. The front page of the Daily Nation was dedicated to the destruction. There is still much evidence of life before the fire. Murals adorn the walls of what was once the Njau’s living area.

“Elimo used to paint on the house walls,” Phillda reminisces. An open air gallery is now open and renovations have begun to turn the old building.

On display today is work by Kibacia Gatu who created an intricate beaded portrait of Nobel Peace Prize winner, Wangari Maathai (who attended its unveiling), Rosemary Karuga and Sudanese artist Abu Shariaa Ahemed.

Also standing in the lush space are impressive sculptures by Samwel Wanjau. Cast in reinforced cement, Wanjau moulded a pair of rejoicing Mau Mau freedom fighters, one 12 foot tall and the other half the size.

The former was notoriously decommissioned as a centre piece in front of the Kenya Parliament when the then Attorney-General Charles Njonjo saw the raw emotion of the fighter. Wanjau was never paid. Luckily this testament to the East African liberation struggle still stands proud at Paa ya Paa today.

Wanjau was also the first artist to live in the Ridgeways location as part of the informal “artists in residence” programme. Phillda tells me that people used to just turn up from all over East Africa. “They knew someone would be here to receive them...we didn’t charge them anything...we would just put another plate on the table.”

Paa ya Paa was eventually recognised as a place where artistic talent was nurtured, and in the early 1990s Arts International in New York began to officially sponsor artists from the USA to live with the

Njaus for three months.

After a four year stint, UNESCO then began providing bursaries for artists to come out.

But like many things at Paa ya Paa, the cataclysmic fire put it on hold. The last person to take part in the residents programme was a German artist who came just after the fire. Rather than being deterred he actually used the burnt remnants in his work.

But the moment has now come to bring back the artists. Phoenix-like, life is stirring at Paa ya Paa, with guided tours (Sh500 adults, Sh200 children), art workshops and piano lessons for the cultural pilgrims who make it.

The centre is also the site of wedding receptions and photoshoots in the “Love Garden”.

For the lucky neighbours, soft piano and guitar melodies drift across the leafy land, from Philda’s band, Bush Bach, which plays a fusion of classical and African rhythms.

The band has played at Kenyan national days, the US Embassy, and in its next outing will be playing in honour of the late Wall Street journalist, Daniel Pearl, in a World Music Day on the Paa ya Paa grounds, on October 25.