# Skin and the Archive: Reading Ecology and Colonial Legacies in a Kuria Drum

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*Fig. 1: Collection: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), University of Cambridge; Object number: 1931.137; Name: drum; Place & Community Details: Kuria, Kenya/Tanzania; Maker's Name: unknown; Materials: skin & wood; Collector: John Junius Osmonde Beven; Date collected: 1923/1930. Photo: MAA/Eleanor Beestin-Sheriff.*

## What makes something or someone characteristic of its place in space or time?

This drum is made from the skin of a Grant's zebra, known by the Kuria as *machage* and zoologically as *Equus quagga boehmi*. An unfussy herbivore whose numbers have steadily declined over the past century due to overhunting and habitat encroachment, the Grant's zebra is nevertheless common enough to be familiar to most res-

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idents and visitors to the wildlife-rich regions of Kenya and Tanzania. And while there have been several theories about the purpose of the characteristic markings of a zebra – each pattern unique to the individual animal – a recent study suggests the alternation of light and dark deters the smallest rather than the largest of dangers. These stripes can confuse pests like tsetse flies and prevent insect bites capable of transmitting harmful diseases.

The black and white zebra skin that was used to make this drum had been hunted or acquired by the Kuria peoples sometime before 1930. Many Kuria families speak a Bantu language – one of several within a region of linguistic use that extends across the plains and mountains of sub-Saharan Africa – while others claim a heritage from areas of the Nile. Known historically within the region for cattle theft and raiding, the Kuria are now a minority group who keep livestock. Cow and goat skins are more common to Kuria objects and the use of zebra hide is extremely rare, suggesting a unique value or function for this drum within its community of origin. Patterns of wear and polish on the drumheads indicate it was likely played at some time; drums such as these have been used in living memory by the Kuria during day-long festivals and celebrations.

This drum was brought to the museum by way of its collector, John Junius Osmonde Beven, a medical officer born in 1889 in Sri Lanka who travelled across east Africa during the early twentieth century as part of the British colonial administration. Educated at Cambridge, this drum and a small number of other items were donated to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology after his death at the age of 41. Based on these objects – weapons, food storage containers, baskets, and household items – it seems Beven's interest was in the everyday lives of people in the region rather than the aesthetic or commercial value of their material heritage. Though we are uncertain of his personal views or actions, Beven worked as a medical professional in a political and professional environment remembered by descendants within the region as being characterized by eugenicist thinking, with both British and Kenyan 'race improvement' societies being established between the years 1926 and 1933.

The legacy of colonial knowledge production shapes the historiography of this drum just as benign neglect in the museum environment has created its condition, with surface damage resulting from unchecked pest infestation during its century of storage at MAA. This drum – now silently on display, for better or worse – can be understood as an expression of the ways in which bodies or objects are shaped by their natural, social, and intellectual environment. Further, it suggests the complexity of a taxonomic project common to several forms of knowledge production including zoological study, museum practice, the application of material skill, and (colonial) government. Yet, while some distinctions can be beneficial like the stripes of the zebra, others – like those between human and non-human animals or cultural

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groups with unequal access to practices of self-determination – can have dangerous and disruptive consequences.

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