

AN EXAMPLE of a collection of tool designs of Kenya. The Akamba "ngomo" is designed to chip and curve wood into different shapes. The blade size, the handle and the weight are important design factors for the efficiency of the tool. The tool relates to wrist and arm actions for different types of strokes.

TALK of culture and people think of calabashes, skins and other museum items. If they go a step further they think of traditional dances, on national days, performed for visitors or at random for tourists, completely out of their traditional context, thus rendering them meaningless.

In traditional society, dances were functional, and their performance was related to other events. Today, what are referred to as traditional dances are not traditional at all. Steps are borrowed from different dances and put together — a move that results in a dance completely unlike the original. When the institute of African Studies talks of culture, it is not talking of this museum type of "culture".

"When we talk of culture,

we are talking of a people's total way of life," says Dr. Ben E. Kipkorir, the director of the institute, "a people's science, eating habits, traditional methods of agriculture, and so on."

Initially, the Institute was set up in 1970 to carry out research in African history and pre-history, ethnography and social anthropology, musicology and dance, linguistics, traditional and modern arts and crafts, religion and other belief systems.

However, the idea of using the research findings of the Institute for national development appealed to a number of people. Thus, at a seminar on oral traditions held in Kisumu in 1979, the idea of the Institute working on a cultural map of Kenya evolved and was enthusiastically supported by members of staff of the Institute.

Planners realise many development projects fail because the people who initiate them are ignorant of certain

Towards a true culture

By WANJIRU CIIRA

beliefs or practices of the people concerned. So the people for whom the projects are meant reject them.

Development projects must, therefore, conform to the traditional values of the recipients and should also use their skills, knowledge and existing institutions for the people to participate fully and commit themselves to the projects.

Yet, this information is not available. "There is a wealth of traditional knowledge that we know nothing about," says Dr. Kipkorir, "and instead of making development plans in our offices, we should go out and learn from the elders".

"And you will be surprised at what you can learn about a people by for example, studying their oral literature," adds Dr. Chris Wanjala, a senior research fellow at the Institute, whose speciality is oral literature.

"A people's philosophy of life is expressed through oral literature", add Dr. Wanjala. He cites the example of a song in which somebody passing outside a homestead asks: "Who is in?" and the woman answers, "Nobody", because in this society women are not taken into consideration in matters affecting society. In such a society development is retarded because the women are not involved.

In other societies, on the other hand, women are actively involved in Harambee building projects because traditionally women were involved in building. "These are all factors that planners have to take into consideration," points out Dr. Wanjala.

To help planners, the Institute is now doing the district socio-cultural profiles project co-ordinated by Dr. Ssenyonga. The Institute is to research,

document and analyse the traditional culture of the ethnic groups in the country's 41 districts in a historical and contemporary perspective.

"This is an mammoth task and will take some to complete," says Dr. Kipkorir. So far, the Institute has covered three districts and the rest will be covered systematically.

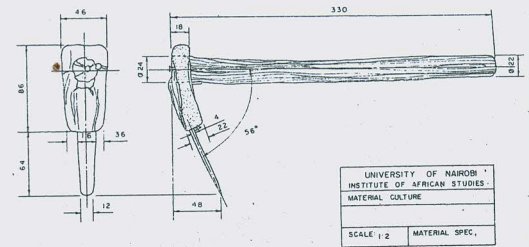
Members of the Institute's staff are particularly happy about having been given the chance to help compile a cultural map of Kenya. "This provides a sense of fulfilment because in some small way, we are contributing to national development," says Dr. Kipkorir.

A visit to the Institute's material culture collection in the basement of the New Education Building at the Nairobi University main campus is an experience to be lived. One learns so much going through the items stored here that one can spend hours in the premises.

The collection, preservation and documentation of the material cultures of the people of Kenya have been the institute's basic concern since 1965.

A systematic collection was started by Jean Brown, one of the Institute's first research fellows, in 1969. She worked with the Institute until 1973, collecting material from all over the country but, with particular emphasis on the Pokot. She was succeeded by Sultan Somjee in 1976. "Here we are concerned with the scientific approach to material culture," explains Mr. Somjee. "We aim at showing that our material culture was scientifically designed to serve its function."

Somjee dismisses the notion that the African knew no science. "One required a knowledge of skin technology to be



SAMPLE of a part of the tool analysis and documentation studies. The dimensions such as the lengths of the handle and the blade determine where the stroke would make the impact and how the tool is controlled.

able to make the skin wear and preserve it," points out Somjee," not to mention the scientific skill needed to construct tools."

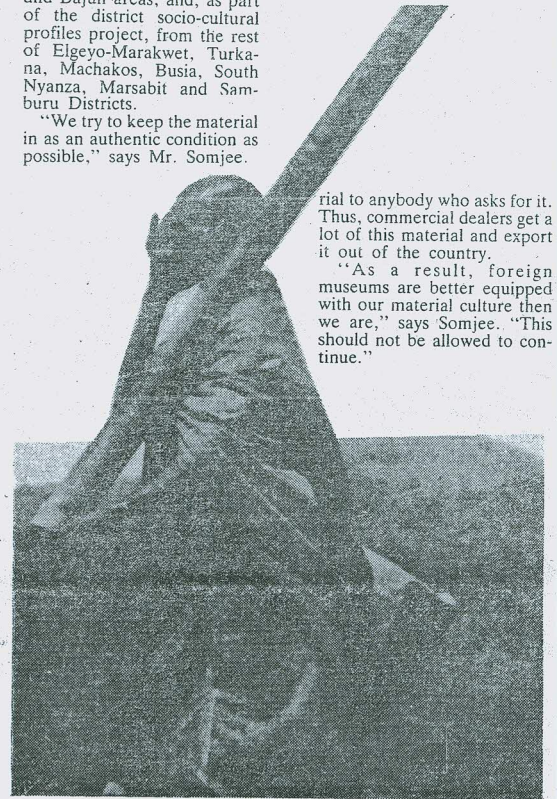
Sultan Somjee has made major collections from Marakwet and Bajun areas, and, as part of the district socio-cultural profiles project, from the rest of Elgeyo-Marakwet, Turkana, Machakos, Busia, South Nyanza, Marsabit and Samburu Districts.

"We try to keep the material in as an authentic condition as possible," says Mr. Somjee.

Somjee points out that he does not have to go out of his way to get the material he has collected. "It is found in markets," he says. As such soon all this material will disappear. "The people just sell the mate-

rial to anybody who asks for it. Thus, commercial dealers get a lot of this material and export it out of the country.

"As a result, foreign museums are better equipped with our material culture than we are," says Somjee. "This should not be allowed to continue."



A WOMAN carries water in a bamboo container, in the Cherangani Highlands of Elgeyo-Marakwet District. Such water containers are part of the Institute's collection and documentation studies of material culture.