

## ANOTHER MAASAI STORY

[Editor's Note: Naomi Kipury, a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at Temple University, is a Maasai woman. The unique perspective of anthropology is a holistic and cross-cultural view, and a central "rite-of-passage" for anthropology students is immersion in another culture through fieldwork. This experience gives a more detached perspective on one's own and other cultures. How is this experience defined for the anthropologist of non-Western origin? Has such a person already gained a perspective on cultural differences through exposure to non-Western and Western cultures? Why is it important to encourage students of different backgrounds to enter this discipline? In this article, Ms. Kipury, currently a pre-doctoral Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution, presents her unique views relevant to these issues. (ASB)]

I was born and raised in a village known as Ilbibil (Anglicized as Bissel), located in Kajiado district in Kenya, one of the two Maasai districts. Ilbibil was and still is such a small place that everyone knows everyone else and social relations are very personal. Because of this, I grew up not always quite knowing who was and who was not a relative. Although Ilbibil is the meeting place of two major Maasai groups called iloshon (sections), Ilmatapato and Ilpurko, the separation was not always clear. My inability to identify my relatives was made even more difficult by the fact that my parents belong to these separate iloshon, in effect making everyone a relative to some degree or other.

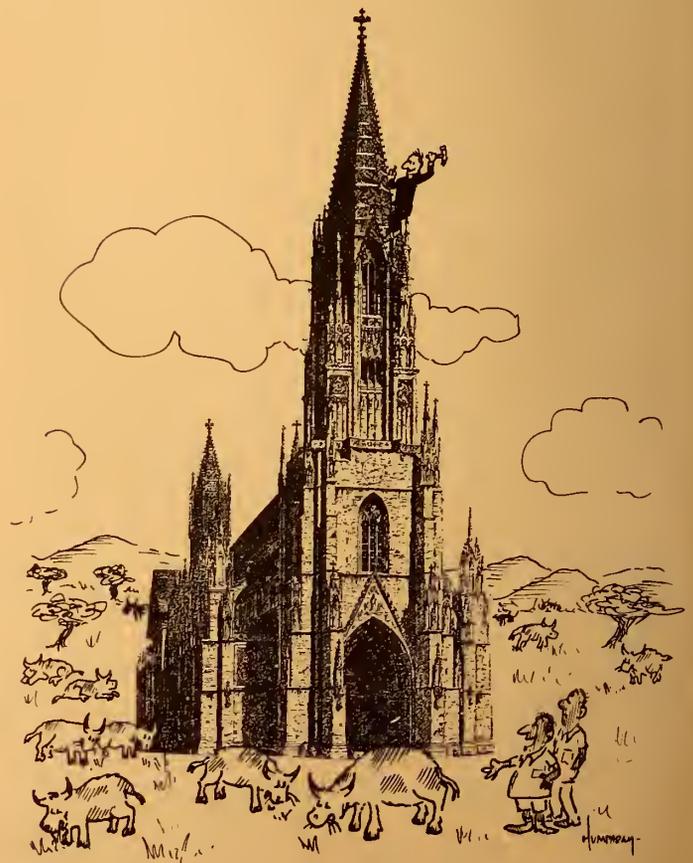
As I grew older and learned to distinguish the various kinship categories, the many "relations" began to fall into place. In our little town, other social relationships also included Ethiopian, Somali, and Asian families who had been trading in the area for many years and who seemed to be part of the community. Cultural heterogeneity was an integral part of my experience growing up.

Although Ilbibil is a small village, it is not isolated from national and international affairs. Tanzania's border lies only 30 miles away, and the highway connecting the capital cities of Kenya and Tanzania runs between our home and the school, which was opened in 1951 by the colonial governor. Less than twenty

miles away sits the police headquarters and the government administration and less than 200 yards from our home stands the village church, with its strong stone walls, symbolizing the religious persuasion into which the Maasai were inducted. The church was allegedly built single-handedly by an Anglican priest who was determined, like others before him, to wipe out "paganism" among the Maasai. But judging from records of church attendance and villagers' comments, the physical strength and architectural tastes of the priest/builder more impressed our people than the spiritual message he tried to convey.

### Early Education

When I was about 6, I attended Ilbibil primary, the only school in the area. The idea of going to school was extremely exciting to me, mainly because my elder sister was already



"ACTUALLY, HIS SERMONS STINK... BUT HE'S SURE HANDY WITH TOOLS."

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attending as were other "big" girls, but also because it was an adventure, something out of the ordinary. In those days [the late 1950's], the colonial government forced children to attend school through the establishment of a quota system. Each district and location supplied a given number of children to the newly constructed government school. It was the responsibility of the newly appointed chiefs and headmen to locate prospective students to fill the quotas. Teachers were equally as difficult to induct into this new educational process. Only a very good excuse would relieve them of this wage employment. As can be expected, there was always a severe shortage of teachers.

In filling the student quota, chiefs and headmen ensured that their own children and those of their friends and clansmen were not selected. This gave special relevance to clans, sub-clans, and any other indigenous social divisions as people attempted to evade the new system. Animosity suddenly shrouded our own little community following the establishment of the school house. My story was different, however. Since my father already had been coerced into attending school, he was determined to send his children as well. Thus, unlike our friends, who were able to stay away from school, we could never dream of doing so. Actually, I was absolutely elated at the opportunity to attend school and could not understand why my grandmother cried and why the majority in my community considered school such a dreaded place. I was yet to be inducted into the horrors of the school experience.

At the age of about 7, I travelled by car to the first all-girl's school in the district at Kajiado, the administrative headquarters. The headmistress was a dedicated and talented South African missionary who spoke our language so well that she even composed songs in Maa. She was affectionately nicknamed "mother of girls." Despite what seemed like fine living conditions, boarding school was a miserable experience to most of us and entirely different from anything we were accustomed to.

The food, for instance, consisting of vegetables, maize, beans, and ugali (made from maize meal), was strange to most of us. Only two or three of us had ever tasted any

vegetables. Cabbage and carrots, over-boiled in the typically English style, were quite unpalatable. As essentially cattle pastoralists, the Maasai primarily subsist on milk and on occasion meat. We are popularly known to exist on blood, however, consumption of it occurs only during very hard times or during convalescence. Since we all were from a pastoral community, where milk was our only food, lack of it was interpreted by us and by our folk as either starvation or malnutrition, and, at times, as both. Once during a drought, boiled maize was our only sustenance, and since most of us did not eat it, we often went hungry.

School was further made difficult by rules we thought unnecessarily strict. For instance, two girls were not allowed to sleep in the same bed, yet for most of us, sleeping in one's own bed was a new experience. We found sleeping alone cold and scary, and so most of us often broke the rules to sleep with friends. Picking berries near the school during the weekends was also not allowed. For these reasons, and because we were homesick, we held crying sessions every evening during the first weeks of school. Cultural differences made home more interesting than school, and so, many girls ran away with hopes they would not be recaptured, as often happened.

### On Becoming an Anthropologist

I was one of the four of the original 80 girls at the school who went on to high school in Kajiado, and, later, to the University of Nairobi. I survived the drop-out rate because I felt I was too far entrenched to quit, so I continued. I am certainly glad to be literate, unlike my mother who never got the chance. Not all that we learned in school, however, was relevant to my education, just as not all that our community had to offer was irrelevant. After years in the "culture" of boarding school, away from my family and community, I felt somewhat alienated from my own culture and sure that I had missed out on a great deal of valuable knowledge. Perhaps my decision to become an anthropologist was partly influenced by my desire to investigate my own society. I found I had a particular interest in social change, the transformations that have been taking place at different levels of society, and how people have reacted to them. These became the focus of my interests in graduate school. In particular, I am examining the complexities

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of class and gender during the transition from pre-colonial times to the present.

### Culture Change Among the Maasai

A discussion of change among the Maasai might sound like a contradiction in terms, since we are often perceived as conservative and impervious to change. In earlier anthropological literature we would have epitomized the concept of the "noble savage." However, the Maasai, like everyone else, have experienced an incredible amount of change that has affected every aspect of their lives. Change as we know it is part and parcel of human survival.

The most pronounced changes to have taken place over the past twenty years are economic, political, and social. The early encounters with colonialism have led to expropriation of land through treaties similar to those signed with the American Indians. In subsequent years, commercialization of land and livestock have led to further economic constraints.

Politically, the Maasai like other small Third World societies have been incorporated into modern states and the world system, whose ideology is radically different from their own. How do we gauge the effect of these transformations within the family level? Although all of these processes have been deeply felt by all levels of society and by all categories of people, the manner in which women have been affected has not been adequately covered in the anthropological literature, partly because of the andro-centric biases of earlier studies. I hope my study and those of others, who are now addressing this issue, will bridge that gap by focusing on women within the total system in which they operate both historically and culturally.

As members of a pastoral society, women "traditionally" had significant control over the herds and the household economy. While men may have controlled the exchange of livestock mainly for the elaboration of affinal and other ties, women controlled the products of the stock and were primarily responsible for feeding the household. At marriage a woman received a certain portion of the household herd, which remained under her jurisdiction throughout the marriage. A portion of this stock she allotted for her son's inheritance. As managers of the production and distribution of the milk and

staple products, women played an important role in ensuring the productivity of the herds for sustenance and for future redistribution. Only through negotiation could any livestock under their jurisdiction be disposed of, loaned out, or sold.

Since colonialism, our pastoral economy and consumption primarily of dairy products, and hence women's economic role, within the household and community, have been undermined by changes that have significantly affected relations between people and among people, their land and their animals. The commercialization of agriculture, for instance, has led to environmental over-use from the reduction and degradation of our rangelands, necessitating the herding of stock to more widely dispersed areas in search of water and grass. While the mobility of herders has increased, the mobility of women with children attending primary day school has been restricted, so that they are often separated both from the men and from the herds which usually provide their sustenance.

The commercialization of livestock has led to a shift in the focus of pastoral production, from milk to meat products. Since meat production requires the calves to be kept with the mother for a longer period, the availability of milk for family consumption or exchange is reduced. Not only does this reduce women's economic importance, so have the more recent development policies that have tended to create a new role for the male "head-of-household" as property-owner and tax-payer. This new system does not accommodate the shared "ownership" of livestock within the household or the differential control of livestock products. The denial of women's traditional residual rights in the cattle of marriage-exchange and sons' inheritance has reduced their productive role still further, and has fostered economic dependence. Increasingly, women are finding it difficult to feed their households, and, men, often separated from wives and children, are similarly unable to devote adequate means to household sustenance, partly because of economic constraints but also because they lack the cultural training as providers of the daily food.

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I do not believe that my society is unique nor are the changes Maasai women are experiencing. Therefore, I hope that my study will be a contribution to scientific discourse and to the manner in which peoples like my own are adapting to economic, political, and social changes. Anthropology is sometimes considered a Western system of thought that grew out of imperialism, but I do not believe that it should be condemned to stay so. If anything, the discipline should be able to provide tools with which to conceptualize culture change in transitional societies. To be able to do this, and for the sake of its own survival, the discipline has had to adapt. The contribution of Third World students could certainly enrich the discipline even further.

**References for further reading:**

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