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# I Came a Stranger and Left a Maasai

// Nabila Khouri

The sun hangs heavy through the bare trees surrounding the village. There are sounds of chanting, dancing, beating and feet pounding the earth. The ground is dusty and smells of dried cow dung; it is a scent that I have gotten used to living in the bush. It lingers in the air as goats and children play around the village, kicking up dust as they run around. As we walk through the we are greeted by the men who have had too much honey beer. They shake our hands and greet us kindly but some continue rambling in Swahili, as though we'd understand them, even if they weren't drunk.

It is a Saturday afternoon and we are guests of honor at the most sacred ceremony and celebration for all Maasai people. We have come to celebrate the circumcision of six boys in the sub-village of Endebezi, in Loibor Siret, Tanzania. The houses of the children who are being circumcised are painted beautifully. The white paint is a bold contrast against the deep red color of the clay homes. There are words of celebration, love, joy and welcome written in the paint and scenes of sunrises and children playing in the cattle corals, more commonly known as bomas. They are scenes of this very day.

We are greeted inside the village gates by our dear friend Kurusha. He is a night watchman at Noloholo, our camp on the Maasai Steppe, and is the one who invited us to the celebration. As we look round the village, every man, woman and child is dressed in the traditional red and blue kangas. They are brightly colored as if they have never been washed. Kurusha's beautiful dark skin, reveals his gleaming eyes and teeth as he sees us come through the thorny gates into the village. He hugs us all, welcoming us to his village. A thin woman, perhaps even darker than Kurusha, approaches us draped in a beautiful red-orange, zigzagged patterned shawl. The intricate green beaded earrings she is wearing glimmer in the sunshine. She introduces herself as Kurusha's mother and gently places her hand behind our heads and pulls us to her chest. It is a gesture of love and acceptance. She recognizes us as her own children and gives each of us a small token of her love. She removes the earrings she has on and takes off the ones I have on, replacing them with hers. The graciousness and generosity of these people will always amaze me. This woman has given me a pair of earrings that she could have sold in a market to some oblivious tourist for \$10 American dollars. That money could have fed her for a week. She gives the other interns I work with a gift of about the same value. In that moment I wish I had

brought my wallet to buy some of her jewelry for my family and friends.

We have accumulated a small entourage. Children and adults stop what they are doing to look up at the mzungu (white people) who have come to visit their village on this very important day. They see that we know residents of the village, that we are accompanied by workers from APW and they soon lose interest. Almost everyone in the village of Loibor Siret knows about the African People and Wildlife Fund (APW), because the organization works directly with the village, helping to monitor and reduce human and wildlife conflict.

We are led over to a group of warriors who have gathered in a circle to dance. The chanting is mesmerizing and I gape with camera in hand, at how their feet seem to rise to effortlessly from the ground to about half my height. It is a sight that one only ever sees in issues of National Geographic or programs on the Travel Channel. The shades of blue and red jump from one side of the circle to the other. Groups of boys rush into the circle holding hands and smiling widely. We are, by far, the most out of place items in the village, but no one is paying attention to us. They are focused on the celebrations, and as far as I am concerned, I am a part of it too.

Kurusha ushers us away from the crowd of dancers a few minutes later, inviting us to eat the meat of the cow they ritually slaughtered that morning. The air just outside the gates of the village is thick with the smell of burning wood and blood. Thirteen heads of cattle were slaughtered for the two-day ceremony. Behind some brush and thicket we see one of the cows laid out on a bed of banana leaves. It's throat is slit, but the majority of the blood has already been collected for the warriors to drink later on in the evening. There is a slit from the breast to the flank of the animal but all the innards are still neatly tucked inside. A few fresh chunks of meat, are roasting on wooden stakes only a few feet away. The air is now dense with the smell of roasting meat and dripping fat. It drips from the meat and splashes onto the coals below, igniting a small flame for a few seconds. Through some more thicket there lays another cow. One of the warriors is gathered around it having his fill of honey beer. He greets us and motions us to take pictures of him with the dead cow.

We sit on a few logs right around the slaughtered creature. It has suffered the same fate as the one before. I wonder if I can stomach eating meat from the animal slaughtered in front of me. I am

overcome with guilt, not for the cow but for how stupid it would seem to these people if I were to refuse meat because I couldn't bear the sight of what I was eating. It's ironic, we can be content with it on the dinner plate but never think twice about how it got there.

Kurusha brings the best cut of meat that has been cooking for some time. He kneels and begins to cut small chunks off of the meat and hands each of us a piece. We eat the meat from the animal that is dead only three feet in front of us. On the last piece I can fit in my bursting stomach, I get a whiff of the fresh blood spilt in random patches around the area, and I almost lose it. Almost. I manage to swallow the last piece and quickly get up, gesturing to my camera saying that I want to take pictures.

As I point my camera down at the man beside the cow he opens the flap of hairy skin that covers the innards. He gently places his hands on the parts of the animal that most Westerners won't find in the display racks at their supermarkets. With reverence he shows me each organ. Gently picking up one, to make space to show me the other. It is as though he is showing me his place of worship. In that moment I realize how important these animals are to the Maasai. They represent everything to them. More than currency, they represent worth of people, offerings and sacrifice, livelihoods and family.

When we have all had our fill, Kurusha shows us around his small community. I count all the houses that are painted. There are six painted, of the thirteen in this small sub-village. Children walk beside us. Some reach for our hands, showing us the boma where they keep their cattle and goats. We gather to talk to few of the community villagers and I attract a group of young vivacious warriors who are looking for a laugh. With the help of my colleague Elvis, I understand their marriage proposals. They ask how old I am and when I tell them I am twenty-one, some of them sigh disapprovingly while others get more curious.

"You look like you were born Maasai," Elvis translates from one of the shorter, chubbier men.

"You are very beautiful, therefore you are Maasai."

I laugh hysterically at all the attention. They ask me why I haven't married yet, as though I must have some sort of disease to be 21 and still unwed.

I say, "If only men in my village were as wise as you. I'd be married."

They get the laugh they were looking for and get me a Coca-Cola before leaving to get ready for the procession of the meat into the boma and into the house where all the circumcisions will be performed.

I ready my camera and wonder from group to group, finally coming to a group of women who are dancing and chanting. They jump almost as high as the men and their jewelry flies through the air as they move. It's like watching a movie, or some sort of surreal dream. I am in the middle of these women and they don't even care that my camera hasn't stopped snapping pictures. I am just another bystander in the celebration. I spot Kurusha's mother on the other side of the circle and she motions me over to her. Her beautiful skin wrinkles with a wide smile and before I can even realize what is happening she pushes me into the circle of the women who are jumping and dancing. Some of the women chant words I can't understand at the top of their lungs, others hold my hands and we jump together. In the center of this circle of women I have never felt more welcomed or embraced by strangers.

This ceremony and celebration is as important to the Maasai people, as my wedding would be to me. And yet I find myself thinking that under normal circumstances I wouldn't invite strangers to my wedding, allow them to eat my food and take pictures of me or gawk in amazement at my fancy attire.

The group soon disperses moving the dancing to the entrance of the village. They are preparing for the grand entrance of the elders and warriors. I watch from the sidelines while children grab my hands. I try to break free from their grips and grin to snap a few pictures. The sun has started to set and the lighting is refracted through the dust that is being kicked up as the procession begins. The men are chanting loudly with more spirit than I have ever seen. Some carry branches of the sacred tree that represents the ceremony, while others carry their spears. In the back of the crowd comes a thin strip of flesh from one of the cows slaughtered earlier that day. They proceed into the boma. Still chanting, they move into the house where the circumcision will take place. Some of the men are now far too drunk to even stand, much less dance. They move oblivious to the people around them, and I see a few sit down outside one of the houses to catch their breaths and settle their stomachs. After the branches and leaves, spears and meat are taken into the house, they gather in a

circle outside to dance again. This time the women and men come together, gyrating like maracas and shaking like pods in a windstorm. This dance involves no jumping, but rather shaking of the shoulders in a motion that I fear I will never master. I am pulled into dance once more surrounded by all the people that have welcomed me into this community so openly and graciously. My fiancés gather around and Kurusha's family cheers me on.

The sun is setting and we have to return to camp before nightfall. Much to our disappointment, myself and the other interns are forcefully pulled away from the crowd of dancing friends that we didn't know only three hours before. We don't stay for the circumcision; it is off limits to anyone who does not live in the village. My questions about the sacred ritual are answered later by my co-workers who are familiar with the custom and what it means to the Maa-sai. The ceremony only happens every seven to ten years and it represents the first step in the stage of a boy becoming a man.

I think about all the children I encountered on my journey and how desperately they all wanted to grow up, much like western children. They want to dance and chant like the men they admire in the village. They want to herd and care for their own cattle and slay the fearsome lion that might attack the bomas at night. I think about children in my neighborhood; the only things they will slay are the monsters in their dreams.