

Eileen Chalfoun

# Beyond the border

## Research in Maasailand

I went to Africa hoping to experience a Maasai view of the world; I also went as library faculty to work with Prescott College (PC) students on a research project for the class “Maasailand: Community Perspectives on Conservation,” led by PC Faculty Mary Poole, Walt Anderson, and Meitamei Ole Dapash.

The project was designed to assist the Maasai people as the government handed over to them the management of Amboseli National Park, their native grazing land.

After a first sleepless first night in Nairobi, I headed downtown to the National Archives to sift through reports, letters, colonial histories, and ephemera to reconstruct historical building blocks of Maasai history.

I was required to purchase a passport for \$2,150 shillings, use an antiquated DOS system to find bibliographic information, fill out endless forms, give them to a “runner,” and then wait for the documents. It was not an easy dig.

I periodically abandoned this quest to visit the history collection on the first floor, with its old photographs of African governors, tribal leaders, the Queen and consorts, and Karen Blixen, author of *Out of Africa*. The images whetted my appetite to discover the underlying history and development of 20th-century Kenyan culture. Despite side treks,

by the end of the day I’d uncovered enough information on tourism in Amboseli and Ol Tukai to begin developing a rationale for part of the research paper.

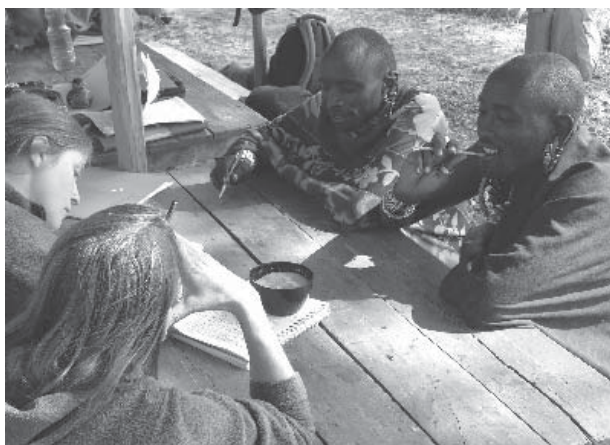
On day three, our students arrived from Amboseli and adventures in the bush. They had interviewed Maasai leaders, learned some Swahili and Maa, witnessed hyenas feasting on a dead wildebeest just outside their tents, and suffered stomach crud. They

were excited, weary, and yearning for yogurt, veggies, and e-mail. We talked, laughed, and drank four o’clock tea until six.

After three days of collecting supplies, answering e-mail, and planning, we headed out to the Maasai Mara on the clearly mythical

road from Nairobi to Narok. The road was more of a series of obstacles for any vehicle traveling to Maasailand, especially our two PC vans packed with tents, sleeping gear, food, cooking pots, and belly-bouncing people.

The first night we weary travellers moored at a small hotel in Narok, found our mosquito-netted beds, and ate *ugali* (stewed corn). Next day, we headed to the Mara over more deeply rutted roads, past fields of wheat,



Prescott College students interview Maasai leaders.

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corn, and barley new since a decade ago, and by sheep and goats minded by children waving to us with skinny arms. We forged on through the bush and over ruts of red dirt through Maasai villages constructed of dried cow dung and acacia thorns.

Finally we reached the MERC (Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition) encampment, where we were greeted by our Maasai guides. The vans stopped near the kitchen, a large circle with a roof of corrugated iron and defined by posts and barbed wire to keep out the vervet monkeys and baboons. I lost my eyeglasses the second day during a balancing act over the deeply dug latrine. (Was this any way to conduct library research?) Make a fire, form a circle, and vent. With the help of intrepid PC students, the next few weeks began to look manageable.

The research project was designed to support the Maasai in their efforts to remain custodians of their pastoral lands, maintain their cultural traditions, and conserve wildlife. We needed solid evidence—primary resource, strong organizational skills, clear writing, and a determination to work cooperatively and collaboratively. We composed, corroborated information, re-wrote, read, and repeated the process each day.

Some of our afternoons were spent at the nearby David Livingstone Lodge on the banks of the Mara River, with bellowing he-hippos and patient, surreptitious crocs waiting for a hippo baby dinner. The dynamic was fascinating and frighteningly real.

One day, as I attempted to give a lecture on primary source citations (“Cite your sources or off with your heads!”) at least 50 hippos answered in a chorus. At the campsite herds of elephants delivered another kind of message: “Work, but remember we’re out here beyond the fence, working to impede your progress.”

These were not distractions, but the beautiful realities of research in the bush, along with the ticks each night lovingly attaching themselves to their victims. Two weeks went by; creative juices ebbed and flowed. A physical paper was beginning to emerge.

Flooding, flat tires, bees in the fresh mangoes and avocados, warm chapatis, vervet monkeys attempting to filch pens, sacred ibis birds on the Mara, lions’ throaty calls in the distance, hippos at night moving up from the river to crunch savannah grasses, visits back in time in a Maasai village, writing, meetings, and interviews. Our document file was overflowing, and it cried out for some organization. Once cataloged and classified, the file, along with the books brought from Arizona, formed the basis of the new MERC/PC Center library. This will serve academic researchers in Maasailand, as well as the Maasai, many of whom had never seen any of the countless books and articles written about them.

After three weeks, my time with the class was drawing to a close, and I was about to move from tent to lodge life. I dreamed of buffet tables of fresh tropical fruit, brightly colored vegetables, chocolate mousse—the kind specially made for European tourists in Africa on safari—and most of all, a bed.

The Maasai report was in draft, and I in rare form. Africa had entered my blood. The smell of roasting goat, hot orange and violet shukas (Maasai cloaks), whispering acacias, the morani (Maasai warriors), mafia (a game) by the campfire, tea with hot milk, the ladies bead cooperative, matatus (taxis), and Meitamei’s memorable story of self esteem. Warthogs are surely a thing of beauty!

I shall never forget our students working tirelessly into the night. Each in a special way made the research project a success. A huge amount of gratitude is owed faculty for offering me, college librarian, the opportunity to teach and celebrate with them in Kenya.

I silently bowed a thanks to all the Maasai with whom I lived, laughed, and worked. In liquid words I learned from them the meaning of community spirit: “*Imikindip olchoni le nkiteng ino!*” (The skin of your own cow is not enough for you!)

Is this any way to teach research strategies?

The very best. *zz*