Maasailand

Jerry Horsman
January 2009

Maasai warriors, I have come to learn, spend a lot of time standing balancing on one leg and a long cane. Tajeu ole Minisa is waiting for me, motionless beside the Acacia thorn tree at the entrance.to his *Boma,* the stockade that protects his livestock and family from predators. "We like to take time," Tajeu had explained, "just looking at our cattle, studying the sky and being aware of our place in Maasailand."

Tajeu is the leader of a group of eight Maasai who had visited England to perform their songs and dances and raise money for their community. Being a cattle farmer myself I had always been intrigued when reading of the symbiotic relationship between the Maasai and their cows. After the performance I got talking with Tajeu. "We are missing our cows," he said, "and all the time wondering how they are doing at home." Tajeu was quick to accept an invitation to visit our farm and meet the cows: which is how they ended up doing a special dance on the lawn in honour of our herd and how they spent most of the day with the cattle after lunching on Cornish pasties and cider. When we produced an atlas they pointed to the hills of Southwest Kenya. "You must come and visit us," they said.

Now, three months later, Tajeu is my philosopher and guide for a week-long stay in his home to meet his cows. "Jerry," he wrote before my visit, "my family invites you to stay with us. We will love you and care for you and you will become part of our family and community. You will meet *Noontoyie,* my favourite heifer." This morning we are going to check on Tajeu's cattle, which have been moved to his brother-in-law's land two days walk away. His own pastures have long since shrivelled to nothing after seven months without rain. Only the goats survive here, standing tall to nibble the few remaining leaves of the scrub. When times are hard the Maasai revert to the old communal system of sharing amongst themselves the land in their tribal area. No herd is allowed to starve while others monopolise the land where grazing still exists.

I'm almost ready to leave: my red and white skirt hangs from my shoulders on cloth straps; my red blanket is thrown over one shoulder and around my neck; rough leather sandals on my feet and a long Maasai stick to hand. I remember to put on my beaded bracelet with all the Maasai colours: red for their blood and their courage; blue and green for the water and grass which supports their cows; orange and yellow for hospitality, orange the colour of the welcoming gourd and yellow for the gift of a cow skin; white for the milk that sustains the race; black for their skin and the dark times in their lives. "You won't frighten the cattle if you are properly dressed," Tageu had said. Dawn is now breaking over the Ngong Hills on the edge of Kenya's Rift Valley. A sharp gusting wind has blown all night and rattled the doors and the tin roof of my hut. The yellow African dogs running loose inside the *boma* have whined at each disturbance. But still the rain has not come.

We leave in Tajeu's pick-up truck, bought from the funds raised on the trip to England and the only one in the community. I get into the front seat as I have long since stopped trying to give up my place to Tajeu's beautifully dressed wife. No, Peninah Minisa has to sit in the open back on a rickety bench and be covered in dust. "You are the same age as my father would have been if he had lived," says Tajeu. "I now owe you the respect I always gave to him. You are my father and you will sit in the front seat." Another part of the deal is to listen to Tajeu's Country and Western tape that appears to contain just one song on an endless loop: *I'm gonna lurv you for ever and ever, Ay-men.* Sometimes you just know a particular scene or sound will never leave you.

On our way the thorn bushes and the wild sage are reflecting green and casting long shadows. The soil between lies lifeless. All the Maasai people are studying the clouds and scenting the air. Tajeu tells me, "Today we can see the clouds building over Mount Kilimanjaro to the West, over Mount Kenya to the North, and Lake Magadi to the South. When the wind blows up from Magadi we will have rain." My reputation depends on it. When I arrived a week ago a few drops had fallen and Tajeu gave me a new name: *Leshan Jerry ole Minisa*, Jerry the bringer of rain of the tribe of Minisa. Would that I could make the heavens open but the seven-month drought will not break today. The cows we are going to see will calve in a few weeks and will soon be brought home. With no grass there will be little or no milk for the calves and some will die.

At this time of the morning the valley is alive with people walking. Walking for hours and hours to the waterhole, the older children to school, tiny children minding the goats, herdsmen in their red blankets, Maasai women in blue shawls carrying water, visiting neighbours or going to the row of dusty shacks on the Magadi Road which sell everything. Tajeu appears to be related to all of them. The truck stops, greetings are exchanged and a thump on the cab roof indicates another passenger has climbed aboard. During an unscheduled stop to examine the undercarriage after colliding with a rock I get out. By now Peninah is half submerged in a joyous crowd of a dozen friends and relatives. I am ordered back into the front seat for some more *forever and ever, Ay-men.*

We drive across the floor of the Rift. Eight million years ago a volcanic convulsion nearly split the continent in two in a line running from the Red Sea down to Mozambique. Vertical escarpments rise on either side of a fault line that has dropped a thousand metres. The floor is pitted with active and extinct volcanoes. The soil is rough volcanic debris. The gullies we cross are now dry but show where the crossing places and bridges have been swept away in violent storms. Tajeu is confident he will negotiate them. " It's alright, Jerry, I have special very strong shock absorbers fitted."

When we arrive at George's *Boma*, the other passengers have disembarked and only Tajeu's younger brother, David Minisa, is still in the back of the truck. George is married to Tajeu's sister. She is the second of his three wives, who, between them, have nineteen children. English first names like George and David are often acquired later in life in their Christian groups. It is an adaptable Christianity that allows a Maasai man to have up to ten wives. He will need to offer a gift of cows to the parents of the prospective bride. Tajeu tells me that George made such a gift of cows for his sister. He is careful to use the word gift and not payment. The same applies to George's land. He has offered his brother-in-law two months grazing as a gift. And, of course, one gift leads to another. Cows are the supreme gift and only the very best is acceptable...

George's children are clustered at the entrance of the *Boma.* They have never seen a white Maasai before and stand silent and respectful. One by one they come forward and bow their heads for me to touch with my right hand. Their parents and elders are accorded the same respect. Tajeu says, "We noticed the difference when we came to England. Here at home this respect is a very important part of our culture. My younger brother David owes me respect. We in turn owe it to you as our guest. We welcome you and we love you." Respect and Love. The language and culture of the Maasai do not make for a simple translation of such words into English. In practice it means I feel accepted and totally safe in the warm embrace of this community.

Before we look at the cows, George invites me to take a cup of tea and we sit together on a log in front of his hut. He looks at me carefully and places his leg beside mine. "My skin is black and yours is white, but we share the same blood," he says. The soft-spoken David murmurs a translation and adds, "He has paid you a great compliment." And for me there is something more than this stated bond of acceptance and friendship between two cattle breeders. We are together in the part of Kenya that holds the origins of the human race tens of thousands of years ago. It is from here that *homo sapiens* spread around the world. George and I share a black ancestor. *"Kashipa oleng,"* I say. I'm very happy.

More friends and neighbours are arriving at the *Boma*. They have come to congratulate George on the birth of his 19th child. A Maasai acquires status by having many cows and many children. Not one or the other but both. With 150 cows George is an important man. His wives are standing with their children outside their mud huts; one nurses her child in the shade of a thorn tree; the goats in their enclosure are calling impatiently to be let out to graze; the Maasai dogs lie in a yellow-brown heap, the colour of the soil..

Tajeu calls me over to meet one of his relatives. We go inside a hut, in darkness but for the glowing embers of a charcoal fire in a ritual Maasai surround of three stones. My eyes sting from the pungent smoke as I feel my way towards a wooden bench. As Tajeu introduces me I become aware of another person beside me. A hand reaches out and feels my bare leg, touches my skirt and the hem of my blanket. The figure begins to speak. Tajeu tugs my arm:

"She is thanking me for bringing her an eighth husband. The previous seven have all died, and she is very pleased you have come. She is 84 and quite blind."

I am on surer ground when I'm standing with Tajeu in the middle of his cows. They are small, thin and wild-looking with wide upswept horns but it is not their appearance that surprises me: it is their extraordinary calm, a serenity they share with their Maasai herdsmen. Each lives for the other. I am witnessing and sharing a relationship that has existed for centuries. As I move alongside the close-packed bodies, placing a hand on a flank or shoulder, they hardly stir. Tajeu points out *Noontoyie,* a brindled white and brown heifer with a dark muzzle and black eyes. They are surely relating to my red blanket just as Tajeu had promised. In the evening when they return to the *Boma* it is the women who will walk amongst them to milk any that have milk to spare. None are ever tied up.

Earlier in the week I had walked with David to see other herds of cattle at a waterhole. Some of them had been walking for two hours from the surrounding hills. While one herd was drinking the others waited patiently in a tight group until called forward. The Maasai have a dozen or more different calls for their cattle, a mixture of shouts, whistles, clicks and sucks than can warn of the presence of a lion, gather them together when grazing or, in this case, tell them it is their turn to drink. "We are always talking to our cows," David said. "Even when we have to kill a cow that is old and sick we like to lie down with her and explain why we are having to do this. We want to thank her for all she has done for us."

David told me more about the special place of cows in Maasai society. "At every stage of life cows are given or exchanged. There are rituals to mark the transitions from boyhood into manhood, reaching warrior and then elder status and especially marriage when the bridegroom must give a present of cows. Friendships are made and strengthened by such gifts. It is also something special for the Maasai, this love of cattle. I think we are born with it. We feel at peace with our cows."

I asked about the drinking of cows' blood. The subject came up when David was pointing out to me a herdsman of extreme old age, perhaps 90, who had walked for two hours that morning

to water his cattle. David explained that his long life was due to having been given blood with his mother's milk. Traditionally blood and milk was the source of a warrior's strength. The jugular vein of an animal would be pierced once a month and up to a litre of blood taken. The wound was sealed with cow's dung. "It's done less today," said David, "and mainly for rituals. But we don't do it at all when the cows are as thin and hungry as they are now."

Looking at George, his thriving family and his extensive grazing land I know he is fortunate compared to many Maasai. Tajeu explains how many are under extreme pressure from worsening droughts and the loss of their historic grazing land to game parks and attempts by first the British and then their own governments to restrict their nomadic life. Theirs is not a cash economy that allows them to buy enough of the maize meal and sweet potato they need to supplement their diet. Their pastoral tradition makes it hard for them to acquire the skills to cultivate this poor, dry land, which is all they have, or to adopt a more commercial approach to selling their cattle. Tajeu tells me, "The big rise in food prices, no rain and the burning of food stores in the election riots.means we have a real famine. It will be difficult for the Maasai to afford to send their children to school. I worry about David. There will be no work for him."

It is my last day with Tajeu and his family. We eat together before I leave and then we hold hands in a circle. I am standing between Peninah and their seven-year-old son Leyian. Tajeu says a prayer and thanks God for the chance that has brought us together. Then he says, "Jerry, I have talked carefully with Peninah and we wish to give you a special gift. We wish to give you our son, Leyian."

A silence falls on all of us. I don't know what to say. Since my arrival I have known this was never going to be a simple exchange between two cattle farmers. It would always be an exchange of different values, hopes and aspirations, how we give and how we receive. We would each be seeing in the other something lacking in our respective lives. I know a little, but not enough, about what is being expected of me as Leyian waits quietly in front of his parents. I am aware Maasai gifts are often symbolic and a mark of esteem and friendship, that the only gift that counts is something of great value to the giver, that Maasai will even give their children to a childless couple. But none of this can guide me now and there is no more

time. I take Leyian's hand and say, "If you, Tajeu and Peninah, think I can be as a father to your son, and show him the love and care you have shown me, then I am highly honoured." There is no calculation now of debt and obligation. I am learning that the words love and respect, giving and receiving, have a special meaning. I can say freely and easily to all this family some words Leyian has taught me and written in my notebook. *Kanyoor intae pookin.* I love you all.

……..*for ever and ever, Ay-men*

****

.