

Traditional life-style and local development

Sustainable local development and traditions: the Parakuiyo Maasai challenge

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International Newsletter on Sustainable Local Development Message from the Editorial Team

In this number Judith Hitchman shares the challenges facing the Maasai in Tanzania. Like most other indigenous peoples of our planet, « modernity » as imposed by the dominant form of globalisation, creates the exclusion of indigenous peoples and undermines their traditional lifestyles; in some countries this even goes as far as threatening the very existence of these peoples as such.

In order to cope with this situation, the Maasai in the village of Parakuyo have developed a form of community organisation that places the education and schooling of their children at the heart of the response to this challenge.

Editorial Team

Judith Hitchman

Yvon Poirier

Martine Theveniaut

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One of the most complex and difficult issues facing the indigenous peoples on our planet is how, or indeed whether or not to reconcile their traditional life-style with what can be considered true sustainable local development. I recently had the very great privilege of spending a week visiting my Maasai friend Adam Kuleit ole Mwarabu in Parakuyo, Tanzania. I had met Adam in Tunisia last year during the work I did with the civil society lobby at the negotiations on FAO Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources, and had greatly admired his way of reconciling tradition and modernity. After all, there aren't many people who can stand up in front of a UN meeting in full Maasai traditional dress (which he always wears) and make a Powerpoint presentation... I took the opportunity of a visit to my Kenyan son Ruwa, north of Mombasa last October, to hop on a plane from Mombasa and fly down to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and travel by bus to visit him and his family...

All too often, our vision of sustainable local development is culturally clouded by Western concepts

of progress, and fails to take the issues of the wisdom of local traditions on board. Worse still, many indigenous peoples are buying into so-called “modernity”, to the detriment of their traditional practice. And the combination of outside exploitation of mineral and land resources, human greed, climate change and loss of biodiversity and of the natural balance of traditional ecosystems all add up to a kind of local development that is ultimately anything but sustainable.

But education can be seen as part of the way forward. This article tries to tell some of the story of the Maasai population of Parakuyo, a small village approximately 60km from Morogoro in the Kilosa district of Tanzania, of Adam Kuleit ole Mwarabu and his family, his colleague Pololet Mgema, and Peter John Mruma, Headmaster of Parakuyo secondary school. It is the result of some very privileged time spent there last November. The village has a population of more than 4000 inhabitants keeping livestock such as cattle, sheep, goats and donkeys in an area of 30,000ha.

A traditional society based on a harmonious balance between men, women and nature: a little background information

Few people are aware of the complex traditional balance of Parakuiyo Maasai society. They are pastoralists, with land that is traditionally a common good. Their territory covers both Kenya and Tanzania. Their society is based on traditions that are transmitted from one age group to another. It has an open-minded, humanist basis, with a structured profound spiritual wisdom, knowledge of medical virtues of plants and trees, and a social practice anchored in honour, loyalty, sharing and respect. Their society is also based on the wisdom of mediation and conflict resolution rather than aggression.

Their pastoral practice is anchored on a deep historical knowledge of their land and the alternating dry and rainy seasons. It used to include cohabitation with wildlife, and a naturally balanced difference between the way that cows graze (they eat the long grasses), and other animals that eat only the shorter grass and browse the acacias trees and other plants. Drought is not a new phenomenon in these regions, but the historic access to highland pastures alternating with grazing the steppe in the plains used to mean that ecosystems and cattle survived. Contrary to the loudly expressed opinions of many so-called development agencies, the Maasai never destroyed the land. Quite the opposite: their rotating grazing systems were a mighty factor of preservation! Until very recently they were a wealthy people, with herds of many thousands of heads of cattle, even though they do not necessarily attach much traditional importance to money per se as they have always used a barter system and paid livestock for dowry and peace making.

Land reform, land-grabbing and the violation of human and animal rights

Colonial and post-colonial land reform frequently granted private land rights to both natural wildlife reserves and parks (to be used to exploit tourism), and introduced Western style cattle ranching on the best lands that were allocated to both black and white elites.

The Maasai have progressively become marginalised and dispossessed of their lands. They have been excluded from their traditional grazing lands such as the Mara (now the famous Maasai Mara game park in Kenya), and Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania. For a people to whom land is a communal territory containing resources, rather than a resource to be appropriated by individuals, (or the State) the above are totally at odds with the way in which traditional Maasai have always governed by social and political conventions designed to reduce the risk of unpredictable climate and semi-arid conditions. The balance of culture and nature enabled the Maasai to live in harmony with other

creatures on their lands.

An example of one of many land-grabs is illustrated by one of several incidents that took place in 2009 (previous similar incidents took place in 2006). Non-pastoralist communities massively evicted pastoralists in Tanzania from their traditional lands with governmental support and collusion. They introduced modern intensive cattle ranches aimed at exporting meat. Farmers entered land that was not theirs, gained deeds to the land, and started to farm. The government supported them, stating that the Maasai were uneducated and poor. Cows were impounded and died of hunger and thirst. There were physical fights over land, and even deaths. Maasai homes were burnt. Access to water for grazing became a serious issue. Cows were rounded up, and the Maasai had to pay 30,000 Tanzanian shillings (about 18 euros) a head as a fine for “damaging the environment” and 1,500,000TZS (880Euros) to put them into trucks that they had to rent (a further expense) to remove them from the “camps”. During the evictions, traditional leaders and the Maasai Bishop Jacob Mameo of ELCT Morogoro diocese went from village to village, organising traditional meetings to organise advocacy. The evicted nomadic pastoralists informed members of the parliaments, the European Union, the United Nations, the African Commission on Human & Peoples’ Rights and Local governments of great violation of human and animal rights, but the impact of this information has yet to be felt on the ground.

From considerable wealth (their cows) the Maasai were quickly reduced to a destitute community: typically, people went from owning from 300 cows to nothing overnight. Children were out of school, with parents who could no longer afford to pay the school fees. This was of course not only unconstitutional, but also a violation of the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous People’s Rights, Human Rights and also animal rights... The Prime Minister created a commission in 2007, but over two years later, the report still has not been published. The government position has remained one of prioritising foreign investment in land and tourism... The regions of Arusha, Rukwa, Morogoro and Mbeya have been the most affected. A population of 10,000 pastoralists have lost more than 300,000 livestock. The affected families have been left by the government to die of hunger and disease.

Fighting against the odds

The Parakuiyo Pastoralists Indigenous Community Development Organisation, was founded by the community as an informal NGO. It uses traditional Maasai leadership as a natural form of governance. In 2006 it became a formal structure to enable it to receive outside funding for local projects. It continues to do much successful work at international level in terms of advocacy and defending Maasai and pastoralists’ rights. It is a member of PINGOs Forum, a national platform established in 1994 to defend indigenous peoples’, pastoralists’ and traditional hunter-gatherers’ rights. The four objectives are human rights, land rights, education (both secondary and higher) and capacity building.

In Parakuyo village itself there are several public standpipes and flush toilets in the village, and some non-traditional houses even have their own showers and flush toilets. Young girls can now go to school and not have to walk more than a couple of hundred meters to draw water for cooking: a major impact on their access to education. There is also a primary school. Vicky, Adam’s wife is a teacher there. The financial crisis has meant that her salary has been cut, adding further to their financial difficulties. Their daughter, Winnie, lives about an hour’s drive away with Vicky’s parents, so that she can attend Kindergarten school, as there is none in Parakuyo. Her parents pay someone to take her to school on his bicycle every day, and only see her during the holidays and once a month...Their son, Longishu, is still a toddler, and full of the joys of a life full of love and relative (if

closely supervised) freedom. They live in one room in a house provided by Vicky's school. Internet connections are an acrobatic business, and Adam (who is very tall) often has to put his computer on a series of chairs on top of the table to get a signal... As a Junior Elder, and much-respected leader, Adam is constantly consulted on all sorts of matters when he is at home.

The heart of the village project is the Parakuyo Secondary School. It was founded in 2005, and opened in 2007. There are 220 pupils. It is the only Parakuiyo Maasai secondary boarding school in Tanzania. It has been essentially community-funded by the Maasai families whose children attend the school (90%). There is also an annual grant of 20,000 shillings for every child who attends. There are classrooms and dormitories for forms 1-3. (The secondary school system includes forms 1-4). There is an almost equal gender balance, with 45% girls and 55% boys attending. 90% of them come from pastoralist families. Five years ago, very few girls attended, but there has been successful awareness-raising of the importance of education, supported by the traditional elders. Parakuyo Secondary School was built for Parakuiyo Maasai children in the Morogoro and adjacent regions. 90% of the children in the secondary school are Parakuiyo Maasais.

The school also uses traditional approaches to help young people develop their sense of community responsibilities, such as allocating them plants and trees to tend. After school, the day pupils also participate in traditional activities of herding and village life.

There are many challenges facing the school, some of them urgent. Those children who have gone through forms 1-3 now have no classrooms or dormitories for form 4. They are currently out of school. There are no science labs or equipment. The kitchen, little more than a sheet of galvanised metal over an open fire, uses wood rather than gas or solar energy to prepare meals, not an optimal ecological solution by any means. Apart from trying to raise funds for the much-needed classrooms and dorms, there is also an adult education project...

As the article says, Maasai communities today are facing multiple challenges: human rights issues, climate change, land grabbing, economic survival and the inevitable migration not to new pastures and grasslands but towards the major cities and tourist resorts, with all that this implies. Whatever the future impacts of government policy or climate change on the pastoralist community, the emphasis in Parakuyo is on education, both through the modern school system and Maasai traditions that are part of the Parakuiyo project. It is an important element that will help these young people to preserve their identity and face whatever the future holds in store.

Judith Hitchman

** There are two spelling variations used in this article : Parakuiyo for the Maasai community, Parakuyo for the village and the school.*

P.S.

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