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Heartbreak on the Serengeti

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AERIAL VIEW OF CAPE BUFFALO
Martin Harvey

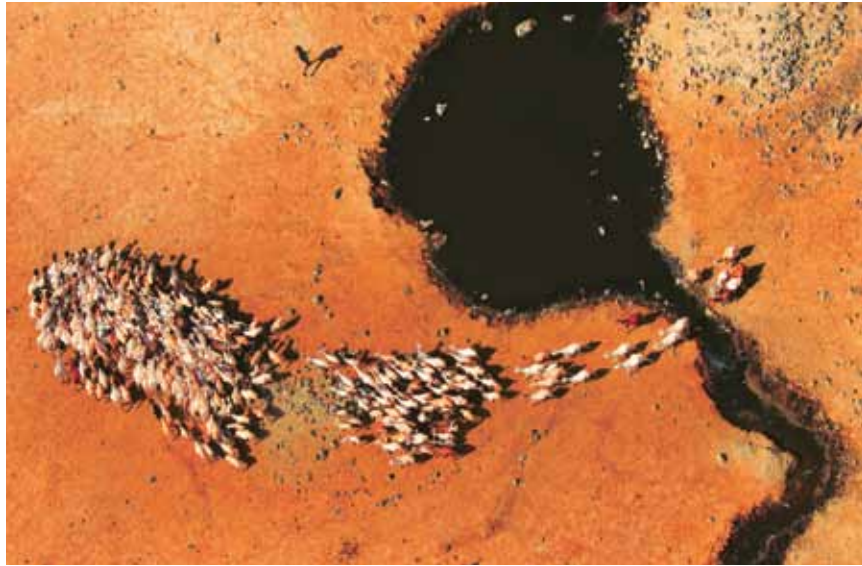
HEARTBREAK ON THE SERENGETI

To the Maasai it's the place where the land runs on forever, but beyond the protected core of this iconic landscape, the land is running out.

The Maasai people of East Africa, who have always gone their own way, do not count the years as others do. For them each 12-month span contains two years—a year of plenty, *olaari*, coinciding with the rainy season on the immense Serengeti Plain and Crater Highlands of Tanzania, followed by a year of hunger, *olameyu*, commencing when the rains cease, the streams run dry, and the great wildebeest migration, more than a million strong, thunders off toward the north in search of food and water. Then the Serengeti grass turns the color of toast and crackles underfoot, and the Maasai herd boys and warriors embark on long, loping marathons to find sustenance for their beloved cattle, which remain the measure of wealth and well-being in this pastoral society.

The year of hunger was several weeks old by mid-July, when the clouds tumbled and split over Ngorongoro Crater, illuminating a drama already in progress on the crater floor.

There in the yellow light a pride of lions padded up out of a streambed, intent on a herd of grazing zebras; a lone hyena, big shouldered and narrow hipped, maneuvered among skittish warthogs; and a pair of cheetahs sat alert in tall grass, almost invisible as they scrutinized a hundred Thomson's gazelles with professional interest. Sharp-eyed vultures surveyed the morning from above, wheeling through white salt clouds whipped up from Lake Magadi.



AERIAL VIEW OF GOATS
Martin Harvey

The night belonged to the animals, but morning brought people down into the crater—Maasai to water and browse their hundreds of cattle, biologists to study the rhythms of life among elephants and lions, tourists to ogle the Maasai herders and the varied wildlife for which this part of East Africa is justifiably famous. People, wildlife, and livestock all converged here on a typical day, living in a workable—but inevitably wary—coexistence.

The first cattle appeared about eight o'clock, inching in single file down the steep, narrow track to the crater floor,

urged along by a Maasai warrior named Moma, who would walk for 12 hours with his herd on this long day. A red cumulus of dust marked Moma's progress down the escarpment trail; he made a melody of clanging cowbells, singing, and urgent whistling, which grew louder as he trudged into view, first to arrive on the crater floor. Like most Maasai he was lean from a meager diet and much walking, and he looked like a biblical prophet in his dusty sandals and red toga, which billowed and flapped in the cold wind. He carried a long spear in one



AERIAL VIEW OF MAASAI HUTS OR OMA
Martin Harvey

hand as he whistled his herd of 80 down to the spring, left them guzzling there, and strode over to take his measure of the pasty looking tourists who had just arrived in the crater, the first of hundreds who would spend the day there.

They brandished cameras when they saw Moma, who struck a proud pose with his spear, his plaited hair bright with beads and bars of aluminum that caught the sun, his earrings dangling from pendulous lobes, his skin smeared bright with animal fat.

"Man," cried a distinctly American

voice behind one of the cameras, "this looks just like a National Geographic picture!" Moma stepped over to view his own image on the camera screen and to relieve his portraitist of a thousand Tanzanian shillings (about a dollar). He collected similar sums from two other tourists.

"What would you do if a lion attacked your cows?" someone asked.

"I would put this spear right in him!" Moma declared, banging his weapon on the ground to emphasize the heartfelt sentiment. Maasai have never been

hunters, but they are fierce in their defense of the herd, and they kill a lion or two when circumstances require it.

Moma stuffed the shilling notes deep inside his robe, and morning rounds accomplished, reentered the world of his

...elephants, which virtually vanished during the ivory-poaching days of the late 1980s, have bounced back...

ancestors, a gaunt figure guiding his herd through another dry winter in a land haunted by lions and hunger. The khaki-clad tourists, meanwhile, popped open the top hatches of their Land Rovers, emerged from the roofs like tank commanders, and rumbled off in a haze of diesel fumes to hunt for other exotic sights.

They would find the wildlife thriving on their safari, much as it does elsewhere in the heart of Serengeti National Park and its companion Ngorongoro Conservation Area, contiguous protected regions comprising more than 8,000 square miles (21,000

square kilometers) of rolling grassland, acacia woodlands, and mist-draped volcanic highlands in northern Tanzania. This area sustains the largest community of migrating ungulates in the world, as well as its greatest concentrations of large predators.

Surveys show the wildebeest population at about 1.2 million, a recent high number for this keystone antelope species, which annually renews the Serengeti's pastures with its massive grazing, trampling, and droppings; the shaggy wildebeest also provides ready prey for lions, hyenas, and other predators. Healthy populations of zebras, numbering more than 200,000, hold steady throughout the region; elephants, which virtually vanished during the ivory-poaching days of the late 1980s, have bounced back, now totaling more than 2,000; black rhinos are stable; lions are on the upswing, numbering 3,500, despite earlier setbacks from disease; populations of impalas, topi, eland, gazelles, giraffes, and Cape buffalo are at healthy levels

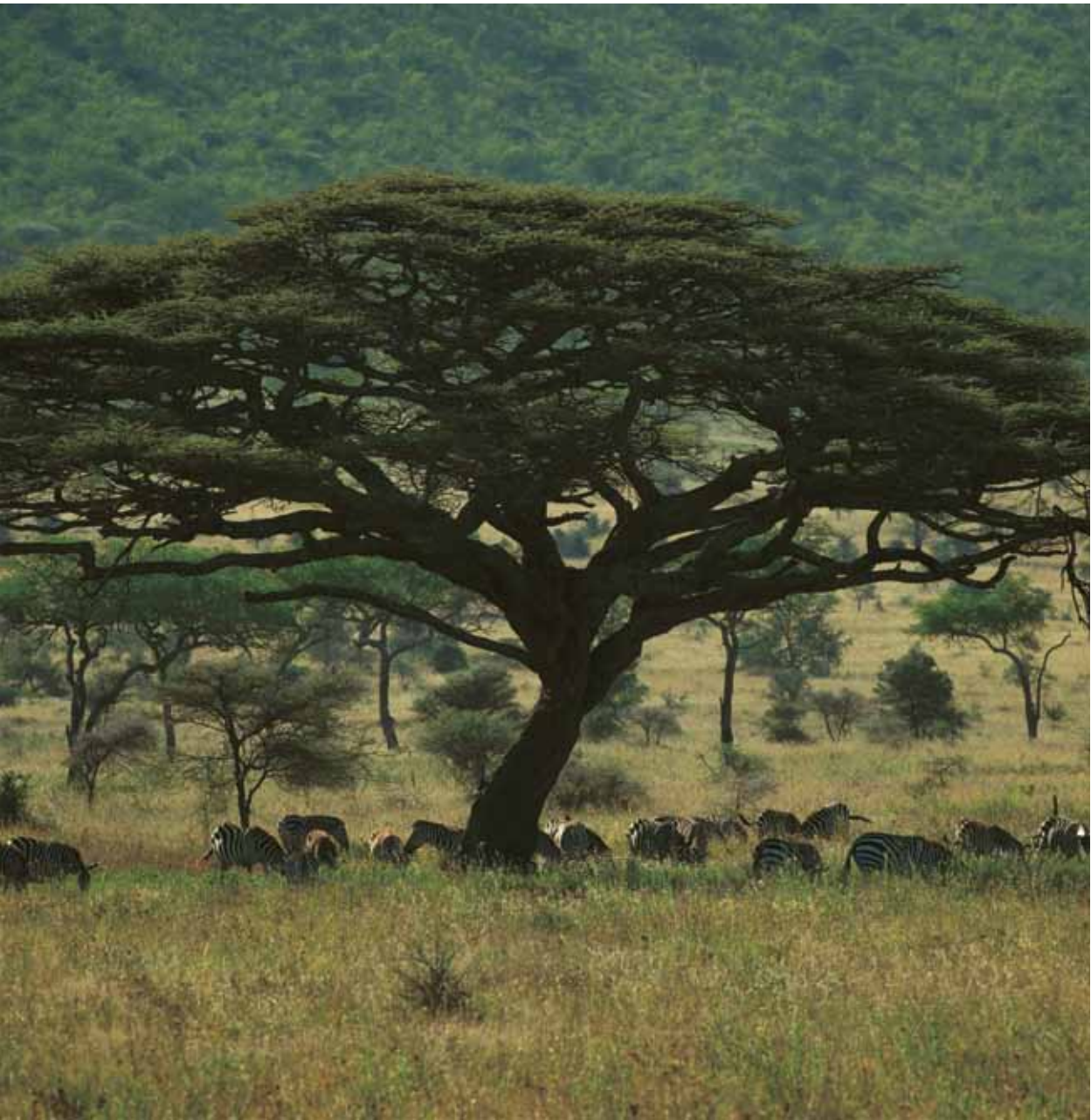
and rising. The only animals in decline seem to be the wild dog and the warthog. On a continent where much of the wildlife has been wiped out, the picture remains generally favorable in the protected areas.

"The Serengeti itself is in good health," said Christiane Schelten, a program officer with the Frankfurt Zoological Society, which advises the Tanzanian government on conservation. "It's intact, and it seems to be working."

It would be nice to end the story on that note, but the narrative becomes less hopeful when one exits the parks to explore the larger Serengeti-Mara ecosystem, where the future of the region's wildlife and people is being written. This larger area, defined by the annual wanderings of the wildebeest herd, wraps around the Serengeti, sprawling over some 10,400 square miles (26,900 square kilometers) of Tanzania and southwestern Kenya, from the Crater Highlands and Great Rift Valley in the east, across the grassy plains and woodlands of the

Serengeti interior, westward down a narrow corridor of hills and scattered woodlands leading to Lake Victoria, and finally northward across the Kenya border to the Masai Mara National Reserve, a small but critical haven where migrating animals find plentiful forage and water in the dry season.

Once sparsely settled and hospitable to the Serengeti's wildlife, the ecosystem has shrunk to half its former size, eroded in the 20th century by booming human populations in Tanzania and Kenya. In Tanzania, where the numbers have tripled to more than 36 million since the country won its independence in the early 1960s, Serengeti and Ngorongoro have become islands of wilderness washed by a rising sea of humanity, with people pressing right up against the patchwork of game reserves and conservation areas that buffer the protected core. Land is at a premium in this poor country of farmers, where less than 5 percent of the earth is cultivated and a quarter of the land is reserved for parks. Almost 40 percent of the populace lives below the poverty line.



ZEBRAS IN TANZANIA (DETAIL)
Jim Richardson

Day and night, people steal into Serengeti to poach wood for building and cooking and to hunt resident and migratory wildlife in increasing numbers. Their proximity to the park brings native Tanzanians into constant conflict with wildlife.

“You see more farms, more livestock, and more cotton and rice cultivation moving toward the park each year,” said Justin Hando, chief warden for Serengeti National Park. “People who used to live 80 kilometers (50 miles) from the park now live five or six kilometers (three or four miles) away—so it’s much easier for them to engage in illegal activity. The animals from the park try to do what they have always done—they cross back and forth over the boundaries. The difference now is that the free movement of animals is no longer possible,” said Hando. “They have more interaction with people.”

That interaction is not always heartening. During several weeks of exploring the Serengeti and Ngorongoro region, I confirmed many reports of

human-wildlife conflict—an elephant stomping and killing a villager armed with a bow and arrow in Robanda; black rhinos bolting in Ngorongoro Crater, where tourists in cars had approached too fast and too close, sending the animals fleeing; poachers setting out hundreds of wire snares on the park’s western borders in hope of snagging a wildebeest, a zebra, or some other protein-rich ungulate for the table or for the lucrative traffic in wild meat. The illegal bush-meat trade, a rising threat in almost all of Africa’s protected areas, annually feeds an estimated one million people in northern Tanzania alone.

The wire snare—preferred by poachers because it is a cheap and silent method of taking game—is also indiscriminate, grabbing any passing animal unlucky enough to step into a noose secured to a tree. This method recently hooked a Serengeti giraffe around the leg, a lioness around the neck, and a wildebeest by the horns. Another lion, snared in the western corridor outside the park, wrestled

himself free of his wire noose, cutting off his hind leg in the process; he has been seen galumphing through the bush on three legs, a sturdy survivor who dominates his territory.

Twenty years ago, when the pressures of population were less, few Serengeti scientists worried unduly about poaching. “It would not be correct to call killing an antelope or zebra or wildebeest to feed one’s family meat poaching,” said Markus Borner, the Frankfurt Zoological Society’s top scientist in the region, interviewed for a National Geographic article in 1986. Now, however, with the market for wild meat flourishing in Africa, villagers around the park can make more money by hunting in the Serengeti than they can by almost any other activity, so the annual harvest of animals in the ecosystem has risen dramatically in recent years. Because hunting is illegal, precise figures are hard to come by. Estimates of the poaching toll range from a low of 40,000 animals a year to a high of 200,000, most of them wildebeests. Such a harvest cannot be sustained

at the higher figure without causing fundamental damage to the ecosystem.

“You can only remove so many nuts out of an airplane before it falls out of the sky and crashes,” said Rian Labuschagne, managing director of the Grumeti Reserves, an enterprise that recently leased almost 280,000 acres (110,000 hectares) of hunting concessions in the western Serengeti to restore the beleaguered ecosystem from the outside in.

The Grumeti Reserves project has already invested at least 20 million dollars in Tanzania to conserve vital migratory habitat in the western corridor; to crack down on illegal hunting by indigenous Africans; and to help struggling villages outside the park by building schools, drilling new wells, providing scholarships, creating tourist jobs, and training farmers in beekeeping and aquaculture—all aimed at weaning citizens away from poaching.

Fences were unknown to the pastoralists like those who first appeared in Greco-Roman literature



WIND OVER LONG GRASS (DETAIL)

Stanley Pinker, 1976

Courtesy South African National Gallery, Iziko Museums of South Africa

around 200 B.C. These free-ranging sub-Saharan people went where they pleased, revered their cattle, subsisted on milk and cow’s blood, and buried their dead “to the accompaniment of laughter,” according to those early accounts. By the 18th century the Maasai had established a strong presence in the Great Rift Valley, where they controlled much of the interior and stamped the land with their own descriptive names. Perhaps the most famous of these was the word they chose for the heart of their homeland,

Siringet, “the place where the land runs on forever.” The Serengeti.

Hope must have seemed as boundless as the horizons for Maasai who lived there. They knew no equals, followed the seasons, delighted in fighting, and deferred to no man. Believing themselves to be God’s chosen tribe, entitled to all of the cattle on Earth, they cheerfully raided other tribes to enlarge their own herds, and their reputation for fierceness taught neighbors to give the Maasai a wide berth. Arab slave traders avoided their area, as did the earliest

European explorers.

The Maasai remained aloof and self-sufficient until the age of Victoria, when drought, disease, and trouble brought them low. Thousands died from a cholera epidemic in the 1880s, followed by an outbreak of smallpox in 1892. Then a plague of rinderpest, a bovine viral disease, wiped out most of the Maasai's wealth and nourishment overnight, and civil wars diluted their grip on the region.

Little fight remained in them following World War I, when the British consolidated their grip on Kenya and took control of Tanganyika. On the Serengeti the British took the first bites out of Maasai holdings in 1929, establishing an 800-acre (323-hectare) game reserve for hunting, which became the basis for Serengeti National Park. Maasai continued to live there until 1959 when repeated conflicts with park authorities over land use led the British to evict them.

"They paid us nothing," said Ole Serupe, the only surviving Maasai elder

who was party to discussions with the British. "We were told to move because they wanted to make a place for the wild animals," he said. A frail old man in three blankets and orange tennis shoes, he now lives with his extended family and a contingent of goats in a fly-specked compound outside of Endulen, a Maasai village on the edge of Ngorongoro's Crater Highlands.

"We refused to move," Ole Serupe said, "because the Serengeti had been the home of our mothers and fathers. Our cattle loved the place. It was a place that even a human could love," he recalled, looking at me through eyes clouded by years in the African sun. "But they made us go. Because I was the senior man among the elders, it was from my hand that they took the Serengeti."

Sitting on a low stool by his hut, Ole Serupe recalled how the British had promised him new land in exchange for the move. "They said we would get a better place to live—one with good water and grass."

The Maasai got nothing of the sort.

The British peeled off a 3,000-square-mile (7,800-square-kilometer) parcel to the east of Serengeti National Park and created a new home for the pastoralists in 1959. Designated the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, this reserve encompassed the desolate lands around Olduvai Gorge, the arid plains contiguous to the Serengeti, and a portion of the Crater Highlands, including the Ngorongoro Crater. An experiment in multiple land use, this new territory was to be a refuge for Maasai and their herds, for exceptional wildlife, and for the development of tourism.

Almost 50 years into that experiment, it would appear that wildlife and tourists are thriving in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area but that the Maasai are struggling. Theirs is the old problem—too many people and too few resources, the same hard calculus that has caused so much conflict on the Serengeti's western borders. Numbers tell the story: The Maasai population has grown fivefold in the conservation area, from around 10,000 in 1954 to more

than 50,000 today. At the same time they have less territory, having lost the most fruitful part of their new homeland in 1974 when they were evicted from the crater floor. Constrained by these and other developments, the Maasai face an uncertain future, hemmed in by Serengeti National Park to the west, by Ngorongoro Crater to the east, and by growing communities all around. Because their grazing range is limited, they have been unable to enlarge their herds to match their growing population. The result is that their wealth—still measured in livestock—has evaporated with the years, from an average of more than 26 cattle, goats, and sheep per person in 1960, to five for each Maasai today. They are forbidden to supplement their pastoral existence by farming on any scale larger than a subsistence basis out of fear that more intensive cultivation will degrade the area's natural habitat.

Bruno O. P. Kawasange, natural resources chief for the Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority, worries that the growing Maasai population



blocks migratory corridors connecting the Ngorongoro Crater with the Serengeti, an important conduit for lions, wildebeests, zebras, and other animals traveling between the two areas. “We want to make sure that these corridors remain open—especially for the lions,” said Kawasange. To make room for the big cats and other wildlife, some 250 Maasai households will be moved.

“We can’t support large-scale agriculture in the conservation area,” explained B. M. Murunya, the authority’s tourism chief. “Conservation does not go along with agriculture.” Given how farming and development have encroached on parks and reserves in northern Tanzania, this seems a reasonable concern, but it does little to reassure the hard-pressed Maasai.

“The wildlife gets better treatment

than the people here,” said Francis Ole Syapa, a Maasai living in the windswept foothills of the Crater Highlands, where we sat in a zebra-striped hut and watched the clouds boil up from ruined volcanoes.

Syapa was expressing a sentiment I heard from many Maasai. “The area is supposed to be not just for the wildlife,” he said. “That’s why it was established as a multiple-use area. Understand?

We Maasai should be allowed to have our own plan to protect the wildlife, to develop tourism, and to decide how the people’s lives can be improved here. As it stands now, we have no real say.” Syapa pointed out that Maasai hold no key positions within the conservation authority, and that only one serves on the group’s advisory board—this, despite his people’s overwhelming numbers in the region. “We live here on the land,

WILDLIFE
Morgan Trimble

but we cannot plan for ourselves how to use it. We don’t have the same rights as other Tanzanians,” he said.

Surely, I suggested, the community must benefit from the millions of dollars flowing to the region—Tanzania’s top tourist attraction.

Syapa gave me a long, searching look, followed by a longer silence. He took a swig of Kilimanjaro beer, placed the bottle on the table between us, and spoke with great deliberation: “I really don’t have the information,” he said, “but I can tell you we don’t see very much of that money here.”

This was painfully obvious down the red-dirt road in Endulen, a Maasai village of cockeyed plank shacks that looked as if they might blow away on the next wind.

So did some of the people in this town of 8,000, which suffers from tuberculosis, malnutrition, and malaria, according to doctors at the region’s only hospital. “We also get brucellosis, which comes from drinking unboiled milk, fractures from fighting, and quite a few injuries from buffalo attacks,” said Jeanine Heeren, a doctor in Endulen’s 80-bed missionary hospital. She also reported that HIV had made its appearance in Endulen, a sign that residents of this community were venturing into the world and bringing new problems to the village.

Endulen was busy, though. Women with shaved heads and jangling silver necklaces picked through oranges and onions in the market, where a butcher in a red robe and baseball cap

hung glistening slabs of goat meat in his stalls, watched closely by a pair of hopeful dogs. Warriors with spears led cattle down a path to Olndogom River, which flowed through town.

Half the village seemed to be in and out of the stream—women washing clothes and spreading them to dry on thorn trees, children fetching buckets of water for the school, herders waiting in line with donkeys and cattle for their turn at the stream. Some of the herders, I learned, had walked three or four hours to get here, a rare source of fresh water.

“Nobody could survive without it,” said a Maasai who had lived his whole life in Endulen.

The village draws its water from the river because the government has built no infrastructure in this region, which grows bigger and more established with each passing year—with or without government help.

“We have been waiting for water for 50 years,” said Raphael Ologolie, an elder I met on the outskirts of Endulen. We sat on the ground outside his neatly

fenced compound and talked, Ologolie, sitting with his knees drawn up to his chin, cocooned in a red blanket so that only his head was visible. “Since the Maasai were first moved out of the park, the government has been making these promises—to bring water, to bring schools, to bring health care. Our people are going hungry. They come to my house every day asking for food—a little cornmeal, a little salt, a little sugar, but it’s never enough. Nobody has kept a single promise to the Maasai.”

For its part, the government says that it will do nothing to encourage permanent settlements in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, which is supposed to be occupied by Maasai nomads living lightly on the land.

“The idea that pastoral people, people who are moving from place to place, will have a fixed source of water and other amenities that the settled communities have, well, we can’t provide those things,” said Samson S. Mkumbo, chief manager of community development for the authority. “For those Maasai who want

to make the shift from the nomadic life to farming, we are seeking an area outside the Ngorongoro Conservation Area.”

Having been uprooted twice before, the Maasai do not want to move again. And whether the government acknowledges it, the Maasai have already settled in to the Ngorongoro region for the long haul, having begun the slow, agonizing transition from the world of nomadism.

They still keep livestock—any Maasai worthy of the name must do so—but they have more goats and sheep than cattle these days, and they spend less time on the land, going out for a day or two rather than weeks or months. They return to live in permanent dwellings, fret about educating their children, take a keen interest in politics, and scratch away at the earth, working in vegetable plots outlawed by the conservation authority. The old ways are fading: Maasai intermarry with neighboring tribes, fewer girls are circumcised, and fewer youths have the stretched and decorated earlobes of old. In Maasai

country today, hiking boots, sneakers, and T-shirts (“Washington State Volleyball Band”) have begun to replace traditional robes and sandals; and everywhere the twittering of cell phones sings from deep in the folds of Maasai togas. A new generation is leaving the villages to make their way in the world.

“I know where I am from,” said one of these educated Maasai, Jombi Ole Kivuyo, who recently traded his warrior’s spear for an apartment and a paycheck in Arusha, “but I don’t know where I am going. I am like a blind man feeling his way.”

This young Maasai may stumble on his journey, but it is more likely that he will survive it, just as his ancestors survived the earlier disruptions of plague, war, eviction, and hunger because they were, to borrow a Maasai phrase, “tough as a hyena’s sinew.” They remain that way, striding along under the immense African sky, looking for the next hill.

Robert Poole/National Geographic Creative