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A Misisonary Among the Maasai

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A Missionary

Among the Maasai

Ned Marchessault CSSp

Someone once said that the cause of World War III will be ... water! Shrinking fresh-water resources, an expanding Sahara, and yearly droughts all seem to confirm this theory. Water in Africa is priceless –

The rain in turn provides plenty of grass for herds and plenty of milk at home.

But the rainy seasons are getting shorter and the dry seasons are lengthening from year to year. The cow bells fall silent in the villages – life dies,

carry their heavy water containers 10 and 20 kms in search of distant ponds and riverbeds that have not dried up.

Bridges – yes, but no waters

In the dry season people dig pits in riverbeds, sometimes several metres deep, in search of the precious liquid. This is not the clear water we were taught about in schools – colourless, odourless – but still it's water!

Periodic rivers are permanently etched into the African landscape. Strange as it seems, one sees bridges – but no river. Interestingly, when the river appears, capriciously choosing a new riverbed, the old bridge stands as a monument to a bygone age “next to” rivers. The emphasis should be placed on the words “the bridge stands”, because there were times when I crossed over a bridge in the morning and in the evening when I returned to the

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where it is, there is a life. Because of that, rain is considered a BLESSING!

The rain has particular importance for the Maasai. Here God is called Enkai Narok – The Black God. He/She is the gracious God who blesses the people with black clouds that herald rain.

and deserted villages revive only in the evenings. Herds trek long distances to find water and families follow the herds. A village seems to be abandoned because of the daily task of searching for water. This makes women and often children “disappear” every day as they

mission, that bridge was gone, carried away during the day by a flash flood.

A major challenge here is drilling wells and boreholes or building water reservoirs. We drilled such a well on an earlier mission, and it cost us \$20,000. Now we have the 180-metre hole, which to this day remains ... just a hole! There was no water. Cleverly enough, often a company investigates for the presence of water, but they will not give you a guarantee that water is there.

A different set of challenges are the water tanks fed by rain water. Sometimes the water is pilfered by humans or animals, as was the case in the Ngorongoro parish. One day elephants paid a visit to the mission. They can smell water at distances of up to 20 kms. Cleverly, the animals lifted the concrete lid of the tank to quench their thirst in front of the vigilant eye of Fr Joe Herzstein. His loud protests went unheeded by the elephants.

Water – inside and outside

My mission in Ngorongoro at a village called Olbalbal has its undoubted advantages – and disadvantages. When I moved into my room there was a burning candle and a kerosene lamp. After a few days I enjoyed a small lamp powered by solar battery. In the corner was a 10-litre bucket of water. On it stood a plastic basin for washing, but that was no guarantee water was there.

I use the outside “shower” which consists of four walls, a tin roof and a concrete floor. Our major convenience is a water pipe with a tap next to the mission. Olbalbal is a village with a local health clinic and a primary school for approximately 500 students. The Maasai use a pond – a more correct term would be “swamp” – to water their herds. A few years ago, thanks to a project, a spring was improved in the mountains; from it water is now brought by pipes to the village. A pipe passes next to our mission and fills our plastic tank of 1000 litres capacity.



"At the tap" each day

Most of the time the water appears at approximately 10 a.m. for a short time and again at 4 p.m. The Maasai use this water for drinking and for washing their clothing. Multicoloured dressed women begin gathering at the tap at about 8 a.m. They come equipped with colourful plastic buckets usually used for selling cooking oil. They sit "at the tap", talk, laugh and joke. After some time, more women arrive driving donkeys that will transport the water to their homes.

As the hours go by, it gets noisy and cheerful. Someone is singing, someone is laughing, and then ... suddenly there is water! All conviviality is over and what seemed like a family meeting turns into a struggle for both water and survival. The issue now is getting water before the tap dries up.

Shoving, quarreling, loading buckets

Someone jumps in the colourful crowd with her bucket – and someone stronger pushes her aside. Everyone wants to be the first to fill her container. Each woman has a thousand reasons why she should be the first to get water. An attempt to "regulate" this is a classic Gordian knot, and the awareness that there is not enough water for all does not help. Any lucky woman with a full bucket moves aside, carefully guarding her treasure.

Women load buckets on their backs, fastening them with one of their many scarves, or they look around for donkeys and load the containers into canvas pockets on their backs.



The last drops of water fall from the tap leaving many buckets still empty. Calm returns along with laughter and chatter. Women exchange news from various places – who was born, who is sick, who is getting married, how children are doing in school. They slowly disperse to their homes to look for firewood or for other chores. The joyful buzz will return in the afternoon, once again turning into a fight when the first drops of water appear at the tap.

Sometimes it happens that voices wake me up as early as 2 a.m. even though the water will not appear until approximately 10 a.m.

Plastic bottles that I put on our corrugated metal roof are silent witnesses of all this. These small bottles, filled with water, are exposed to the sun for a few hours. I have heard the sun will purify the water: is it true that water, placed in a plastic bottle and exposed to several short hours of sunlight, becomes "clean" and safe to drink?

Seeing the bottles on the roof, the Maasai have verified one more time ... these foreigners are nuts. ■

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Psalm of Humanity for Creation

O Divine Love, O Infinite Beauty, Creator God,
how breathtaking is Your creation.

From the grains of sand beneath our feet
to the vast starry night sky,
as we contemplate Your infinite revelation,
how can our hearts not be transformed?

Humanity's pillage and over-consumption is hurting
Your exquisite creation.
Hasten our steps along the journey to healing;
"take us to the heart of what it is to be human."

Turn our eyes to those already open to Your voice,
already inspired by Your Gracious Spirit to
walk with the poor and live more simply.

We praise You and thank You for Your forgiving Mercy;
for strengthening our spirits to do Your Will.

May the love for our common home grow
so that Your creation will flourish,
so that as one human family,
we have renewed hope with the dawn of each new day.

Praise to You,
O Divine Love,
O Infinite Beauty,
Creator God.

Amen.



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