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A Strange and *Wonderful* Journey

Alais Ole Morindat

TANZANIA

Jn 1961, I was captured by troops and taken to school.

They knew that Maasai boys like us would be out tending our livestock on the plains. So, with a lorry and a Land Rover full of police, they waited.

It was morning ... not too hot, not too cold and we were beginning to play around. Then ... a loud noise My friend who was older than me said, "Look at that!" I turned and saw creatures coming towards us from afar.

"What is it?"

"This is an elephant."

"But what about the little one?"

"This is a baby elephant!"

Then, as they came closer, my friend said, "It's not an elephant. It's a rhino and a baby rhino."

By now, it was making a lot of noise and elephants and rhinos only make a lot of noise when they want to attack! My friend told me that the best technique to defend yourself is to slide flat onto the ground. So, we did. But ... strange ... as they came closer, there were fumes and they smelled very bad to us.

The next thing we knew, soldiers jumped out of the lorry and grabbed me. Then, we drove around picking up others in the same way. I think it took many hours and we were just lying in the back of the lorry. It was very bumpy and we thought they were going to kill us, but after a while, we were taken to a house. They opened the door and said to go in. Somebody translated and told us not to worry; we weren't going to be killed. We were informed that this place was called a school and that it was not a bad thing.

My home country of Tanzania had just gained her independence and the new government decided that tribes like us, the

Maasai, were in need of a little "development". But really, they meant westernization. And in order to fit into this concept of western life, they thought we needed to drop our own culture, to forget our weapons and sticks, to dress differently and to take part in formal education. The President wanted at least fifty boys from the Maasai tribe to go to school. The Maasai people rejected the president's first decree. And the second. And the third. And the fourth. Eventually, some families sent the children they didn't like, but my father said,

The new government decided that tribes like us, the Maasai, were in need of a little "development". But really, they meant westernization.

"I will send the one I like the most." Eventually, the president just sent the troops and police in anyway. They came and captured whoever they could lay their hands on.

The bell rang, the door opened and we ran

On the first night, we ran away. When we went into the school house we were told to find a bed and sit on it. They were double-decker bunk beds, so if you couldn't get the lower bed, you had to climb up to the top. Through the windows we could see even more children coming. The translator told us that when we heard the bell, we had to run. So, the bell rang, the door opened and we ran. They hadn't told us they didn't mean for us to run away completely. They tried to stop us, but we were too fast! We followed the sun and we knew the mountains, so by the next day we were home. It

was a twenty kilometre journey and I was only six years old! But it was no good. They had written down our names and our fathers' names and that same day, they came to bring us back to school.

Order, order, order

School didn't mean anything to me. I really thought they were going to kill us. They were rude and they dressed strangely. I didn't like the soap and the smells. The beds were unusual and the food was not milk. We were taught to hold chalk and we were given boards on which to write. If you wanted to speak, you had to raise your hand. You had to stand up. You had to sit down. You don't talk. You have to listen. You have to look at the teacher. You have to write as he writes. Turn right, turn left. Pray. Don't talk. Sleep. Wake up. Pray again. Order, order, order.

I really did think they were planning to kill us eventually. But I'm still here. So there was no killing. It was a government school and we were all of us Maasai. Over time, many people dropped out ... or tried to. I remember once they gave us an exam and we were told that if we failed, we'd be sent home. All of us did the exam in three minutes! We put an x on the paper and nothing else. But we were not clever enough! They looked at our monthly test results instead — so there was no going home that time.

Becoming a warrior

After primary school though, I deliberately failed the exams and I went home to become a warrior.

To become a warrior is a real exam. To become a warrior is to move from childhood to adulthood. You have to learn about taking responsibility. You have to learn about guarding the interest of your community against intruders or any other external forces. You have to learn about looking after

natural resources. So when I went home, I forgot all about school. After that, I spent my days as a protector of the grass and the trees and the livestock. I learned to make sure our animals weren't killed by wildlife and they provided food for my people.

I learned all about responsibility — not just for my own area, but for everybody else's as well. A warrior must care about everyone's welfare — men and women, young and old ... It wasn't just about making sure the pastoral system worked though — it was also about representing my clan and my tribe whenever they might need me to. I was sent to deliver messages to destinations that were four hundred kilometres away. I had to think and run and be respectful and learn warrior-ship skills. I had to survive in the forests. I had to kill whatever killed the cattle. I had to walk through the night and protect my tribe. I even had to steal cattle from other tribes! It was a tough life and we had to stay mobile. During the dry season, I stayed in a camp and learned not to think about the pain of hunger

My two lives meet

I eventually did go back to school because of a Catholic priest I met who became a great friend. From there, I went to teacher training college and came back to work with Maasai children — something I enjoyed and did with all my heart. As time went on, I realized how valuable my "other" education could be for my people. For instance, I read government letters that were not supporting pastoralists and informed them of what was happening. I read newspapers and every day we had gatherings after school to discuss our community issues. As their needs grew, so did my thirst for education. This led me to Kimmage and Maynooth and UCD in Ireland. Eventually, I ended up working as an advisor to Development Co-operation Ireland in Dar Es Salaam.

But after two and half years of this very luxurious job in the city with brass plates and salutes, my heart took me back to my people and back to the bush. Nowadays, I spend my days in an office in Arusha. But in the evening I commute back to my Boma which is forty-five kilometres away. Here we have our huts in a circle and the cattle and goats are kept in the middle.

In my Boma, my two lives meet. Outside, my mother might roast a goat. Inside,

I am on my laptop. Sometimes, I change out of my suit into my traditional clothes. Sometimes I wear half Western, half Maasai! I'm showing that it is possible — to hold the spear in one hand and the pen in the other! I come to a classroom in Kimmage to tell students about the grass-roots needs of the Maasai, but then I go back to my own people and I share my knowledge about Europe and about globalization and about privatization.

A bridge between worlds

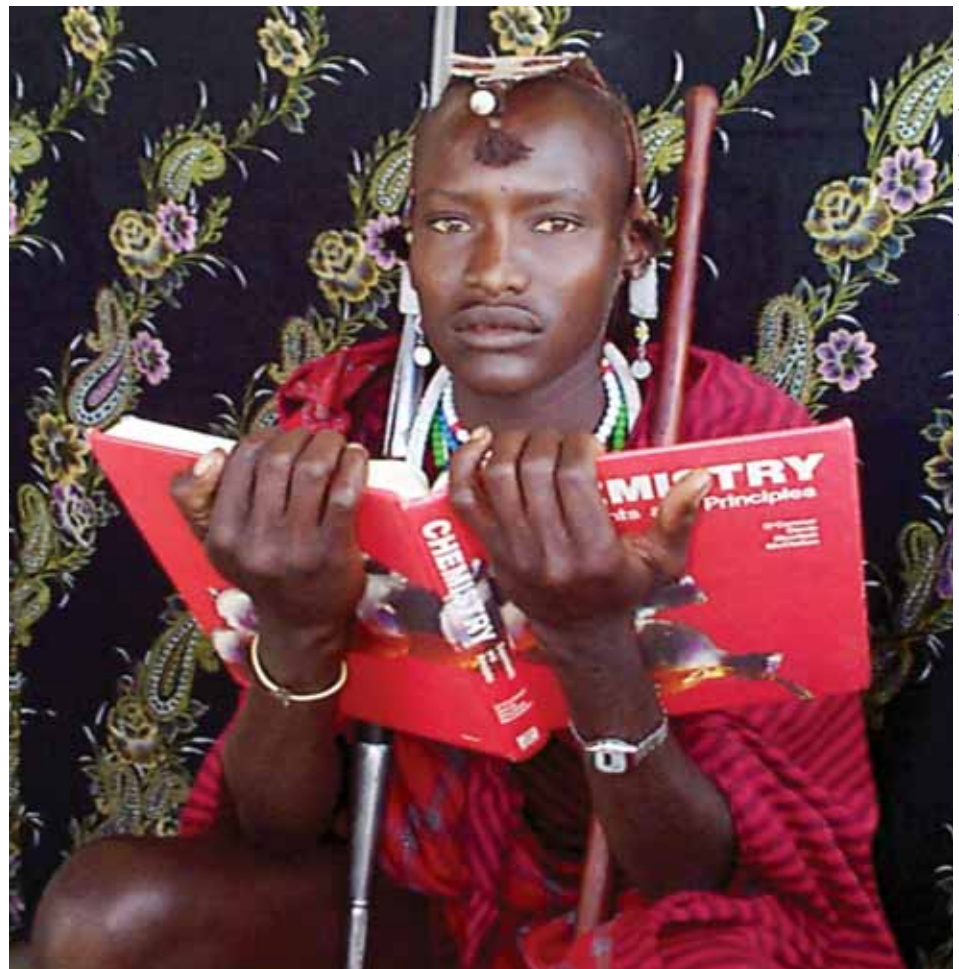
I prefer always to go back to my own people. But to go empty-handed is no good. I feel I've become a bridge between worlds — not a big or a strong one — but a bridge, which can ferry a few people and a few ideas. And ideas are very important. I want to bring back my experiences of walking through different lives and cultures and colours and people. I want to create a meeting point of cultures for the North and the South and to create a true dialogue around issues of partnership and respect and support that is actually meaningful.

My own story has taught me a few things about development aid which I've always passed on to my various employers ... sometimes to my cost.

This is what I've learned ...

It's good to support people and to provide development aid through — for instance — personnel. But those people should not dominate the processes of development. Where one culture is undermined and someone else's culture — usually the West's — is promoted, I just can't see it as fair. When these workers and donors own the development initiatives, then it's not development. They should build communities and individuals and then hand power over to them. It has to be about partnership, not domination. ■

Alais Ole Morindat is consultant for the activities in the East African region of the Development Studies Centre in Kimmage, Ireland which was founded by Irish Spiritans and operates out of their facilities. His mandate is to promote and oversee the many programs in which DSC is involved in Tanzania and neighbouring countries.



Photos courtesy of Ned Marchessault CSsP