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In The Hands Of The Government: The Last Maasai Journey

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On January 27, 1979 in the early morning, my father Dopoi Olol-Dapash summoned me to his o'rrippie - a Maasai elder's retirement hut. The morning was bright, cool and a crisp gentle breeze blew into my face as I walked towards the secluded hut that my father had lived for the past thirteen years. My father, the oldest living known Maasai, wanted to talk to me about

something that had been on his mind for several years. I walked in and, in accordance with tradition, I bowed - allowing him to touch my head. This is both a greeting and a sign of respect. He gave me permission to sit down and then he began to speak.

"Do you know the reason why I called you?" he asked

"Well open your ears, eyes, mind and heart because I want to share with you some important historical information about the problems of our people."

"When the white man arrived here and conquered our lands we were relegated to two small reservations, one in northern Kenya and the other in southern Kenyanorthern Tanzania. We knew that it was the beginning of the end of the great Maa nation. Our land base was the indiscriminately appropriated and destroyed. We were driven out of the best grazing lands - lands that our people had occupied since time immemorial. Now, the black Westerners (Africans) are using the same white man's system of government to strangle our people economically, socially, and culturally and in every other way that serves their interests. I have watched for many years as we have become increasingly poorer and more and more helpless. It pains my heart and soul to see this happen to a nation of a once proud people. I can see your children and grandchildren in generations to come living in poverty and working as servants to alien masters on their own land. Look, we do not understand the western concept of doing things. Our way has always been simple, clear, rational and communal- in tune with the will of Mother Nature. Now our destiny is in the hands of those who do not care about the future our children or our land. They are telling us we are unintelligent and backward. Our cattle and culture are obstacles to their development and well-being. Now you must tell me because you have been to their world. What is it that these westerners want from us? Why can't they let us alone to tend our cows and continue to lead our precious way of life? Why do they want to take all our land without thinking of the future? As a warrior living in the two worlds - western and Maasai you have a sacred responsibility to think speak fight, and always be loyal to your people. Be our eyes and ears and I hope that when it becomes a matter of life and death, as I know it will in the years ahead, you will let your people know so they can run from the mighty hand of the westerners."

My father's words have stayed in my heart, mind, and spirit since I heard them, twenty years ago. Now aged over one hundred years, he continues to worry over the survival of his people. As I report to him the escalating cultural, economic, political, and social destitution our people, he continues to hope that Enkai, the God of the Maasai who has seen his people come through times of disaster, will also come to their rescue this time. My father and the majority of my

people continue to hope for some divine intervention to their problems. After all, no avenue exists to enable them to legally or politically address the problems that they face. Each passing day increases their anxiety, intensifies pessimism in the future, challenges the worthiness of their way of life and forces those already on the edge to surrender to powerful external interests in exchange for nothing other than agreeing to settle permanently in the lowest cadre of social, political and economic structures of their two countries. My people, the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, once called "the Lords of East Africa" are becoming servants in their place of birth.

While the present situation of the Maasai is deeply rooted in the immediate British colonial past, the present and the former independent government regimes of our two countries (Kenya and Tanzania) have purposefully maintained and even refined the colonial land policies to ensure access and dispossession of the remaining Maasai traditional lands.

In Kenya for instance, the government initiated long-term plans to dismantle pastoralism by enacting the 1968 Land Group Representatives Act. Contrary to the traditional Maasai communal land ownership system, the 1968 Groups Representative Act facilitated the adjudication of the Maasai territories and the establishment of group ranches. The government anticipated that by introducing group ownership of land, the Maasai seasonal movement in search of pastures for their animals would be curtailed. This would then lead to the Maasai becoming sedentary. No consultations took place before the demarcation process was put into effect but since the Maasai were already too concerned about continued land loss to outsiders, the "land security" that new legislation purported to guarantee compelled them to comply with the act and the adjudication process.

The government was concerned about maximizing the potential of the county's rangelands through improved commercial livestock husbandry and wildlife conservation for tourism. They were not concerned about providing land security for the Maasai people. The Maasai communal land use system was seen as an impediment to profitable commercial land use in the country.

This government-invented conflict soon led to occasional clashes between members of various group ranches over boundaries which unlike the Maasai natural boundaries - are imaginary lines that are extremely hard to locate. The introduction of the group ranch concept greatly weakened the social bonds and cohesiveness of the Maasai people and led to an emerging rivalry over land. It was at the onset of the group ranches that the Maasai people for the first time realized that land was indeed becoming scarce. People whom once generously shared

every resource available were now becoming more and more individualistic, more concerned about the welfare of their own livestock and families, as opposed to the larger Maasai community. The long-term consequence of this problem was that the Maasai were no longer able to successfully confront drought due to restricted movement, a decreased land base, and loss of community support. Restricted grazing range due to the established boundaries of group ranches led to overgrazing in all the ranches. This in turn led a gradual decline in livestock numbers both for the overall community and for individual families - resulting in increased poverty.

The adjudication process benefited scores of people outside the Maasai community and a clique of Maasai - an emerging elite - who collaborated with the adjudication officials to exploit the ignorance of the Maasai community. They allocated to themselves, their friends and relatives, great chunks of land. Today, this small class of sophisticated Maasai, and by extension their families and relatives, stand out as a wealthy, well-educated, and political powerhouse in the midst of an increasingly impoverished marginalized and mostly violated underclass. The creation of this small polished class of the Maasai people was not by happenstance. By selectively empowering a few Maasai, powerful individuals in the central government have ensured undeterred access to Maasai lands.

Between 1978 and 1993, an estimated 300,000 acres of land was appropriated by the government. In 1988, for instance, 12,500 hectares of the Olooltoto and Nkasuriaa group ranches in Narok district were demarcated and designated for a proposed military base without the knowledge of the Maasai inhabitants. This is in spite of the fact that the government already owns hundreds of thousands of acres of land, in strategic locations for military operations. The Maasai efforts to have the government rescind its decision were thwarted through a government warning that those Maasai opposed to the annexation of the land in question would be severely punished. Police brutality against the Maasai is far worse than with other citizens and the sheer thought of an encounter with the police made the Maasai reluctantly abandon claims for the return of their land.

Tremendous pressure continues to be exerted by the government on the Maasai to abandon their nomadic ways of life. National development agendas and political statements from the president to the grassroots political leadership constantly decry the Maasai way of life as anti-development and undesirable in the twenty-first century. Now, the pressure for the Maasai to subdivide their group ranches into individual plots as both a land security measure and a step toward modern development are enormously difficult to resist. Indeed the subdivision process

began several years ago. Where subdivision has taken place and the Maasai have been issued individual titles for their plots, the government has further encouraged them to sell part of the land and their cows and use the money to develop the remainder of the land. This process is leaving countless Maasai without land or livestock - which are essential for their survival.

A class of landless Maasai paupers is in the In Narok district, for instance, many landless, cattle-less middle age and younger Maasai are now engaged in undignified labor as night watchmen, cleaners, laborers, gardeners, and nannies, or they have resorted to alcoholism, prostitution, or illegal activities. Their masters are the new owners of what were once their ancestral lands.

Maasai problems have not been limited to land loss. Inequitable distribution of development resources such as healthcare and education is responsible for their inability to respond to the modern challenges. Many Maasai children do not receive any meaningful education and often do not go beyond elementary school level. Those that achieve a good education do so in spite of, rather than because of, the existing system.

Action is now urgently needed to reverse the current land loss, cultural destruction, economic exploitation, and social ills being committed against the Maasai by their government. While we the Maasai must take a first step to attempt to correct these wrongs, the good will of our fellow citizens and the global community is imperative. My people have held on their culture, land, and survival for so long. It is now time to stop further destruction of their livelihood.

We must embark on serious activism and educate our people about their problems. We must now move from discussing their problems to actively looking for solutions. We must be prepared to risk standing up against the governments' misguided policies aimed at obliterating our people and advocate for equal opportunity and treatment under the law. While there is no society that will forever remain static to change, change must be gradual and must be determined by the people it will effect. This should and ought to be the case for the Maasai.

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