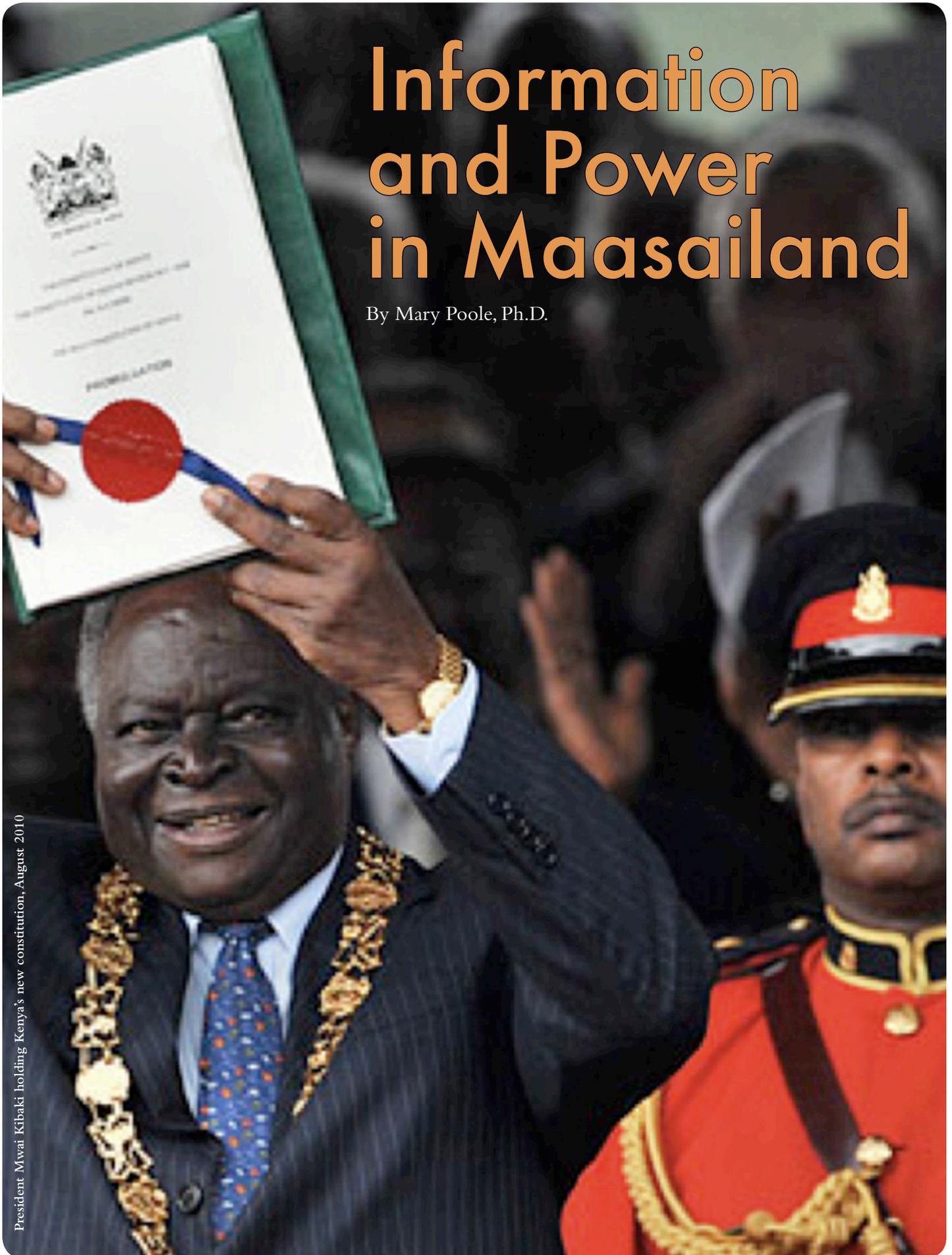


Information and Power in Maasailand

By Mary Poole, Ph.D.

President Mwai Kibaki holding Kenya's new constitution, August 2010



The man said, “Atta empala,” in the language of the Maasai people. “I have the document.” I looked at the smudged photocopy wrapped in plastic, the ancient typewriter script that likely made holes in the delicate paper of the original. The man before me was Moses Mpoë, a member of the Maasai community who had been waging a lonely fight for the return of his family’s homeland at a place called Mau Narok. Mau Narok is 30,000 acres of wet, lush ancestral Maasai land taken under British colonization a century ago and never returned.

It was the summer of 2008, and I was in Kenya teaching a field studies program of 12 Prescott College undergraduate students with Meitamei Olol Dapash, a Maasai community leader and head of the College’s partner organization, the Institute for Maasai Education, Research, and Conservation (MERC). Our class was in Kenya to share our educations with Maasai activists, many of whom, like Mpoë, could not read and write themselves, but understood better than I the power of information and access to it.

The field studies program that Meitamei and I have taught since 2005 is Maasailand: A Study in Community Activism. Every summer, the course is built around a different piece of work undertaken on behalf of the Maasai community, and that typically involves research. Throughout the year between summer programs, Meitamei gathers information through conversations with hundreds of Maasai community leaders and activists to determine the research project that would most meet their community’s priorities.

Mpoë was in our camp because the answer to Meitamei’s inquiry in 2008 was land rights at Mau Narok. Mau Narok is sacred ground. That means that it has played an essential economic, spiritual, political, cultural, and social role in the life of the Maasai people. The Maasai are pastoralists whose lands, before colonization, covered much of present-day Kenya and Tanzania. Mau Narok is the headwaters of a region of hundreds of thousands of acres of dry land, an area that enabled the community’s survival during deep droughts, and was an essential aspect of their land management strategies.

Instead of being returned to the Maasai community at Independence in 1963, Mau Narok was reoccupied by absentee landlords—family and associates of Kenya’s first president. Mau Narok has been deforested in all of the flat places. It’s devoid of the nutrition that was for centuries provided by cow dung. Rivers have been dammed and are polluted by modern pesticides and fertilizers. The community’s desire for the return of Mau Narok is for homeland, culture, sacredness, economic security, justice, survival, past, and future.

Meitamei had invited Mpoë to spend the summer educating our students about his fight, and the document he gave us was evidence that the occupation of Mau Narok was illegal under

current Kenyan law. It’s important to note that in the context of Kenya, even freshman from Prescott College are considered highly educated people and possess the skills to access information that can make the difference in the fight for equality of an Indigenous community. The summer of 2008, Prescott College joined Mpoë’s struggle: our job was to find more documents, dig into archives,

books, letters, and maps, reconstruct the paper trail of how Mau Narok had been taken. We would then report back to the community.

We found ample evidence that the occupation of this Maasai homeland was illegal under both British and Kenyan law. In August we gave our

report to several hundred Maasai community members. The following day, 700 Maasai people moved back onto the land with cattle, and began to build homes; they have not left since.

What followed the summer of 2008 was a protracted fight with the Kenyan government that involved state violence and arrests. Efforts were made to settle other Kenyan people on the land in order to prevent the Maasai claim. Intimidation was used. Cattle were seized. In the spring of 2010 the Maasai filed suit in Kenyan court. This was an unprecedented move.

Meitamei Olol Dapash organizing in Mau Narok, 2010

Kenyan Maasailand



President Jomo Kenyatta, 1963



Prescott College students research Mau Natok land case at Kenya National Archive, Nairobi, 2008



Defendants arrested for peaceful protest in Mau Narok, 2011

Kenyan media grabbed hold of the story and reported on it extensively, generating support from other marginalized Kenyan communities. A movement was born of this struggle that has seen leadership emerge from Maasai youth, pastors, elders, women, and men. The ruling in the case this spring is expected to be in the community’s favor; 600 acres have already been returned to the Maasai through a lower court ruling.

The Maasai struggle for land rights exemplifies something that is well known in much of the Global South: the importance of information to the struggles waged by marginalized communities—especially as the power to create information is shared (a process that is known as “decolonizing knowledge”). In our world here in



Crowd gathered at Mau Narok for peaceful protest, 2011



the U.S., we are saturated with information—information at our fingertips. It can be hard to appreciate the transformative, liberatory power that information can have in places with little access. Information is the drop of water that can bring dormant seeds of vision to life. That is a power already in the hands of our students.

Today Prescott College embarks on a new venture with the Maasai community. In 2010, Kenya adopted its first postcolonial constitution, which leapfrogs ahead of those of Western countries in women’s rights and Indigenous people’s rights. It devolves power from what was virtually the sole rule of the country’s president to a newly created county government structure. A governor, an assembly, and various ministries now represent Maasai people in Narok. This leadership is bringing the talents, education, and vision of the community to an agenda of transformation: to create equity in tourism, design structures for sustainable conservation of wildlife, undertake land policies that protect Maasai culture and economy, and embed the value of cultural survival in the education of children in Maasailand.

Through Prescott College’s longstanding partnership with MERC, we will contribute to this moment of opportunity. This coming summer of 2014, for the first time, Prescott College Ph.D. and Master of Arts students will come to Kenya. They will help build a model of research that incorporates the need for information of the Maasai community leadership, and the ability to share the power of education with the people they represent. Additionally, members of the Prescott College Board of Trustees will take a third official trip to Kenya in July 2014 to see firsthand what’s being done and to continue strengthening our partnerships there. 🌍

If you are interested in becoming involved in MERC and Prescott College’s work in Kenya, please contact Mary Poole at mpoole@prescott.edu.



Crowd gathered at Mau Narok for peaceful protest, 2011



Three-day prayer meeting of Maasai leaders, 2011