



Photos courtesy of Mary Poole

Reclaiming Indigenous Lands

Prescott College students work to recover land for the Maasai people of Kenya

By Mary Poole

The presentation was held in the conference room of the Seasons Hotel in Narok, the largest town in Kenyan Maasailand, a town of dirt streets, open-air vegetable markets, and cows grazing on patches of grass sandwiched by cinderblock buildings.

Dozens of red velvet chairs in neat rows faced two linen-covered tables beside a white sheet tacked to the wall – the projection screen. Our donated projector was past its prime, and the room had to be darkened to see the faintest outline of an image, accomplished by stapling thick maroon tablecloths over the windows. When those ran out, people in the room offered *shukas*, red blankets worn by Maasai people. The room was transformed into a reddish-hued cave.

Our class – 10 students, their teachers, and Maasai colleagues – have arrived hours early, the students in seats of honor at the front.

Prescott College Board members, here to witness and support the students, set about organizing tea and other tasks.

Maasai people began filing in, elders from villages near town, gradually overfilling the room. Roughly half are from the topic of the presentation – Mau Narok, a precious part of Maasailand illegally taken under British colonization and then meted out to elite Kenyans as spoils of war after Independence in 1963.

Mau Narok residents set out the previous day, traveling barely passable rain-soaked roads, in buses and on foot. They came to meet our students, to learn about their research into the broader loss of Maasailand, about Indigenous land rights in other parts of the world, and to strategize together about the current court case to reclaim this piece of land – a case made possible by the research of Prescott College students.

For the past six years, Prescott College students have been engaged in the fight waged by the Maasai community to recover its stolen land. The work of these students has changed the course of history for the Maasai people.

One might wonder how students from a liberal arts and environmental college in the southwestern US became involved in the struggles for justice of an Indigenous African community. The answer is that our students are demanding an education that brings them into the world with skills to do effective social justice work, and there is no issue more compelling to them than Indigenous land rights.

Since the 1970s, led by Native American movements,

Indigenous communities have gradually stretched open the limits imposed by prior understandings of how power and privilege operate in the postcolonial reality, infusing social justice activism with new ideas.

Indigenous communities share a common connection to ancestral land and all of its inhabitants, one that creates a basis for culture and community not found in more westernized societies. Where land has cultural meaning beyond market value, human beings can experience their own humanity differently. The United Nations and other international bodies have begun to not only recognize the value of Indigenous relationships to land, but have also begun to create legal frameworks for declaring colonial and postcolonial land seizures illegal and returning land to Indigenous communities.

Prescott College students became involved in land rights activism in Kenya through a summer program that I created with Maasai human rights activist Meitamei Olol Dapash in 2004–2005. That first year 12 students, led by Kaitlin

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Noss '05 and Ann Radeloff '05, met weekly to co-create the first course, read and talk about Indigenous rights, become conversant with their own cultural lenses, and to hold fundraisers for their plane tickets.

The program that resulted is as much their vision as Meitamei's and mine. Over the years students have taken initiative to create more programs, including water, scholarship, and pen-pal projects; field guide training; and media center development. The Maasai Community Partnership Project was established and now involves many members of the larger community of students, faculty, administration, alumni, and members of the Board of Trustees.

For the past two years, our work has focused on the return of ancestral land at Mau Narok. This lush, fertile 30,000 acres of forest and grassland, headwaters of rivers and streams cascading off the famous Rift Valley escarpment, was critical to the Maasai community and its nomadic life before the arrival of the British. At the time, no one family or clan lived on land as rich as Mau Narok so that the entire community might converge there and be sustained in times of drought.

In 1907, a British settler seized land at Mau Narok under the protection of the colonial government. At Independence in 1963, colonized land was returned to more elite Kenyan ethnic communities, and Mau Narok was re-occupied by members of the inner circle of Kenya's first president. The forest was razed, rivers dammed, wheat grown for export, and Maasai herders beaten and fined for straying across its borders. Maasai people now occupy the dry lands south of Mau Narok. Without a



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drought reserve they lose up to 90 percent of their livestock in dry times, keeping the community in perpetual poverty.

In 2006, the Prescott College summer program conducted primary research on the historical loss of Mau Narok based on documents gathered from Kenya's national archive. An in-depth report was produced and delivered to the Maasai community, and students raised \$5,000 to initiate a lawsuit.

Over the past two years, led by Meitamei, our colleagues in Maasailand have organized the community, assembled a legal team, and filed the suit, currently before Kenyan Superior court. The timing is ripe: Kenya voted this summer to establish a new constitution that will dissolve political power and reconstitute land tenure. The suit for the return of Mau Narok will establish precedent, perhaps even beyond Kenya, to other post-colonial societies.

The case has caused a stir in Nairobi and in Maasailand, where Maasai have begun to move back onto the land, their cows now grazing the former wheat fields. This year, the 2010 Prescott College class provided legal research for the lawyers trying the case. Our students researched more in-depth history of Mau Narok, explored two other potential land rights cases in Maasailand to establish patterns and context, and surveyed successful Indigenous land rights cases in other parts of the world to inform legal strategies.

These students worked hard through the summer, reading documents in their tents into the night under the glow of headlamps, going back over maps to reconstruct the history, pushing themselves to get it right, to cite everything they found. In Maasailand, opportunities such as this case come around less than once in a lifetime. Our students understood this, and gave it everything they had.

The presentation lasted seven hours. The students had tried to hone delivery to an hour and a half, not including translation (into the Maasai language), every word written on yellow note cards in the interest of speed and precision. But the community was engaged from the moment the first word was spoken – translators elaborated, elders interjected, maps were suspended on the makeshift screen and pored over with great attention.

Our students were thanked from the heart by community

members, one after another. One man stood and shook with emotion as he said, "we have suffered so much, and no one has heard our despair until now."

These were not *just* students, but colleagues in a community of faculty, lawyers, community activists, and Board members. They are highly educated people, with skills that are desperately needed, to read archival documents and reveal hidden truths. They can think critically, and therefore can develop and support an interpretation. *Right now*, they are needed by the world.

During the community presentation, I noticed Board members and spouses moving about quietly, refilling thermoses of tea, patiently sitting through long stretches of un-translated Maasai language. Our unity of purpose in that moment – the painstakingly-worded yellow note cards, the refilled sugar bowls, the smiles of encouragement, the humility expressed by all of us together, sharing in the service of a marginalized community – made me feel more proud than ever to be part of Prescott College.

Through its support, our collaboration in Maasailand has a community center with 10 acres of land, computers, and a growing land-rights library. All for the use of Prescott College, the Maasai community, and our common work: land rights, women's empowerment, water rights, environmental conservation, and culturally empowering education.

For more information or to donate to our projects, visit maasaicpp.org.

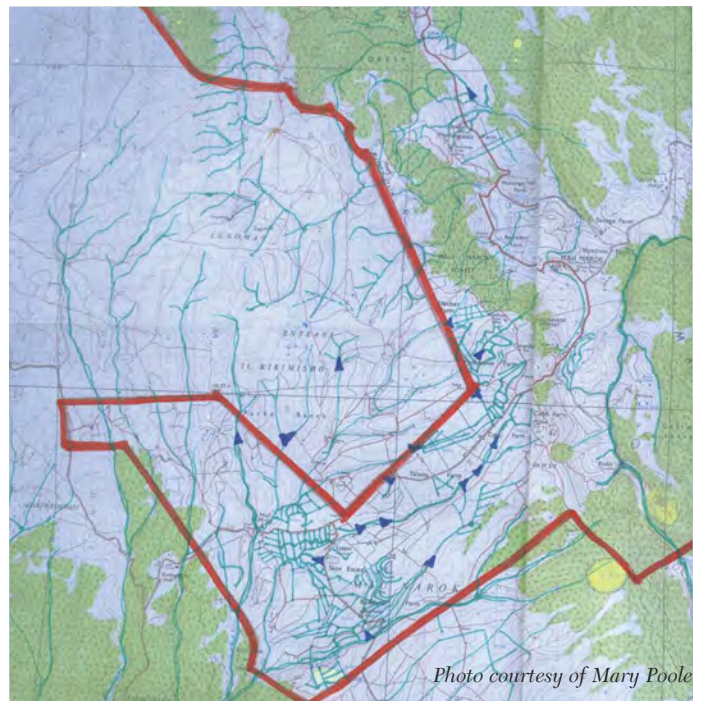


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