



See Change

Earlier this year, leaders from the Maasai tribe in Kenya gathered to repudiate the act of female genital mutilation. Susan Minot traveled to the Loita Hills to bear witness.

I left New York late on a frozen night and arrived to sunshine and the feathery warm air of Nairobi. Two days later, on February 6, 2019, in a remote area of Southwestern Kenya, 42 cultural leaders from the Loita Maasai tribe would come together to declare their commitment to abandon female circumcision of girls. The date was chosen since it is world zero-tolerance day for female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), and because I am interested in matters concerning the least protected category of people in the world, adolescent girls, I accepted an invitation from my friend Nick Reding to witness the historic occasion. The Kenya Loita Maasai—a group within the estimated one

million Maasai—are a deeply traditional, historically pastoral tribe of 40,000, recognizable by the red tartan blankets often draped over their shoulders and their vertical jumping dances. Though Kenya outlawed FGM/C in 2011, the law had not eradicated a tradition the Maasai have followed for over 2,000 years.

Nick runs an organization called S.A.F.E.—Sponsored Arts for Education—the NGO instrumental in creating this gathering. Having volunteered in 2001

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IN STEP

MAASAI WOMEN MAKE THEIR WAY TO THE CEREMONY, WEARING BRIGHTLY COLORED SHUKAS. PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOMÁS CORREDOR.

with a doctor on the Kenyan coast, Nick was struck by how uninformed most AIDS patients were: They thought the disease was caused by witchcraft. Being an English actor, Nick knew how theater reaches people. With an acting troupe, he traveled to remote rural communities, creating plays that entertained his audience while also educating them about HIV. After the shows, nearby clinics accustomed to only a trickle of visitors would find scores of people lined up to be tested. Over the last eighteen years S.A.F.E.'s work has expanded to address issues of water, peace, the environment, and FGM/C.

From Nairobi, I get a ride about three hours west to Narok, through a dry savanna of thorny bush and tall euphorbia that look like fistfuls of licorice sticks, in a convoy of land cruisers carrying S.A.F.E. workers and trustees. I'm excited to see baboons roadside, lazily strolling by on their knuckles. Although I am familiar with the issue, on the way I learn more about FGM/C. A clitoridectomy, type one, slices off the tip or the whole clitoris. Type two usually includes the labia minora and majora, the inner and outer lips of the vagina, which are cut to the bone. Type three, infibulation, has the vulva stitched together, leaving only a small opening to allow for urine and menstrual blood. Though the origins are unclear, FGM/C predates both Islam and Christianity and was possibly first performed on enslaved women in ancient Rome. Eventually the practice became embedded in the cultures of the Middle East, Africa, and Indonesia. Over the next decade, 30 million girls worldwide are estimated to be at risk.

Clitoridectomies are not necessarily linked to an adolescent girl's rite of passage. In Maasai culture, girls are sometimes expected to have sex before marriage, occasionally starting as early as age ten. When a girl begins to menstruate, and her father deems it time, she will go through a three-day ritual sequestered in a hut. At dawn on the third day, three of her contemporaries, wearing all black, escort her to where an older woman, in the name of purification, takes a razor to her genitals. The girl wears a blue shuka—a draped cloth, the color of the sky—and receives a chain. Afterward her legs are tied, often to a post or rafter, while her wound heals during the following weeks. Now a woman, she is ready to be married. If she becomes pregnant after she weds, as is expected, she will no longer go to school.

Childbirth after FGM/C can be difficult, if not life-threatening. In the past, a fatality might have been explained by superstition—a curse, a stranger passing through the village—not by the scarring.

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Amos Leuka, a savvy man with slight buckteeth and a civic calling, and Sarah Tenoi lead the SAFE Maa team in the village of Olmesutie, in the Loita Hills. The organization has been diligent in choosing project managers who are local. When she was in her late 20s, Sarah, who had then worked at S.A.F.E. for many years, was at an outreach performance when she heard a girl scream. Recognizing that scream, she left. Sarah herself had been cut and nearly bled to death; she could not work knowing what was going on. Having her own daughter now, whom she did not want cut, she asked

Nick: Could S.A.F.E. address this issue as well?

Only men are permitted on the Maasai Council of Elders, the governing body of the tribe, so Amos, an electee of Loita's council, first raised the subject ten years ago. "This is a meeting of the elders," they said. "Why are you speaking to us of female matters?" He persisted, and

reluctantly the elders allowed the anti-campaign to begin. A substitute for Kisasa, the "purification," was proposed: a "modern," much-reduced cut to the clitoris. But SAFE Maa and some circumcisers created a broader alternative rite of practice, or ARP: The cut would be replaced with the pouring of milk, so important to the Maasai, over a girl's thigh.

Leaving Narok we drive four, often bumpy, hours to the Loita Hills, winding up on a bright-red dirt road through a lush green landscape with blooming yellow acacia trees. The road turns white, and we pass expanses of atrophied field, tundra-like baked areas of land overgrazed and underwatered.

Eventually we arrive at Olmesutie, where one road runs beside a few concrete buildings and thatched mud huts. It's early evening. An escarpment to the West shadows a sloping field. Beyond are rolling hills with occasional small herds of cattle or goat ambling past. Stacks of plastic chairs wait for tomorrow's ceremony. We enter the gate of S.A.F.E. headquarters and Nick greets us, handsome, exuberant, and exhausted, having stayed up late the night before waiting for the bus carrying Samburu, another tribe, from S.A.F.E.'s project in the North. Amos and Sarah are there. S.A.F.E. first set up their base of four acres on this denuded hill. Now, more than a decade later, an oasis of spreading acacia trees testifies to the possibility of quick land restoration.

A group of Maasai women, heads shaved and colorfully adorned in patterned wraps and layers of beaded hoops, sit together peeling hundreds of potatoes. Nick has arranged for lunch tomorrow for 2,000. We greet the women in Maa, their

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Up Front

Rites of Passage

language—“Supa”—and they respond, “Supa oleng.” Their hands caress ours. In Kenya handshakes linger.

Nick shows me around S.A.F.E.’s pink-and-red cement office: three bare rooms with a couple of tables. A pair of moran, the young warriors, appear behind the building, and one feels the awe of meeting rock stars. Their stare is unwavering. They wear short plaid shukas with belts, and masses of necklaces dangling with dime-size aluminum discs. A narrow horn of hair is fashioned a foot high off their foreheads, in line with an aluminum curved scythe, giving the impression they are balancing a half moon on their head. In another era, these warriors would raid cattle, walk for days, and slay lions. Today they will as likely travel by motorcycle.

We are each given a single, round-cornered tent in a glen of tangled grass. Through thorny trees I make out the outline of men sitting in a circle discussing tomorrow’s procession; above in a moonless sky, stars blur like diamonds. Cicadas sing, and the men’s voices hum in the darkness. Tent zippers close, the clink of tin cups. Someone whispers for a water jug. Voices are low and unhurried, and laughter is quick and lazy.

In the morning as we dress up I smell goat being grilled. The celebration is scheduled to start at 10:00 A.M., but as guests arrive all morning

on foot, we will start, Kenyan time, at 1:00 P.M. I wander through a fairground near white peaked tents being draped with red bunting.

A young woman stands out in a fitted pink sheath and matching capelet. I ask her where she is from. She points toward the escarpment—a village nearby over there. Her name is Cynthia Simantoi Oning’oi, and she is here with Amref Health Africa—one of many logos in evidence. The field has become peppered with long, comma-like flags advertising organizations.

Cynthia speaks softly and calmly. Her parents were “learned” and, not wanting her cut, had sent her at eight to boarding school. One day, at fourteen when it felt safe, she visited home. As soon as her mother left town on a motorcycle, seven women came and grabbed Cynthia and forcibly cut her. It was like being raped. Back at school, she met with deeper humiliation when a teacher singled her out in class as a Maasai and made her describe her cut. She found speaking of it nearly as horrible as the act. When, in college, she “got a baby

on campus,” she suffered further shame during her delivery when nurses at the hospital gathered around to gawk: Come see, there is a cut girl here. Now she encourages girls to admit being cut, not to be ashamed.

The crowd gathers, estimated finally at between 3,000 and 4,000, and I think of all the untold stories. The elders, in surprising white baseball caps, begin the procession and enter the semicircle of tents. Two representative elders declare the Loita commitment to ARP, the alternate rite of passage. Their blessing completed, they stop in front of the women, babies in laps, wreathed in yellow and orange shukas. Moments

later, the women are stretched out on the sunny ground, and the men occupy the shaded chairs.

Fifteen schoolgirls from Olmesutie, wearing long white S.A.F.E. T-shirts and white headbands, sing in a semicircle. I look over at Nick watching from his seat, beaming.

The Maasai, like most tribes, have an oral tradition, so the ceremony is full of songs and performances in either Maa or Kiswahili. One moving S.A.F.E. skit has women the age of circumcisers, dressed similarly in purple-and-white-striped kangas, split into two groups. One side sings in favor of cutting, the other against. The women

sway and slap themselves with leafy branches. Slowly one woman at a time defects and dances over to the side against cutting. Presenting both sides of a topic has been key to S.A.F.E.’s success. The performances never preach; people can decide.

Eight young warriors appear, prancing, flipping looped braids, and thrusting their shoulders in their classic dance. The audience, sleepy in the heat, perks up at their hypnotic throat-humming. “When my time comes to marry,” they sing, “she will be uncut.”

The ceremony lasts more than three hours and ends with the signing of a document by local leaders and a proud-looking Amos. Later Nick and Amos consider changing the acronym to LRP, the Loita Rite of Passage, no longer an “alternative.”

That night, after we have danced with the Maasai and eaten goat curry, I hear that in other communities, during the rite, girls may now be given books and pencils, symbols that they will continue in school. One change leads to another. □



POINT OF VIEW

SUSAN MINOT, AUTHOR OF *MONKEYS AND THIRTY GIRLS*. PHOTOGRAPHED BY EMMA HARDY.