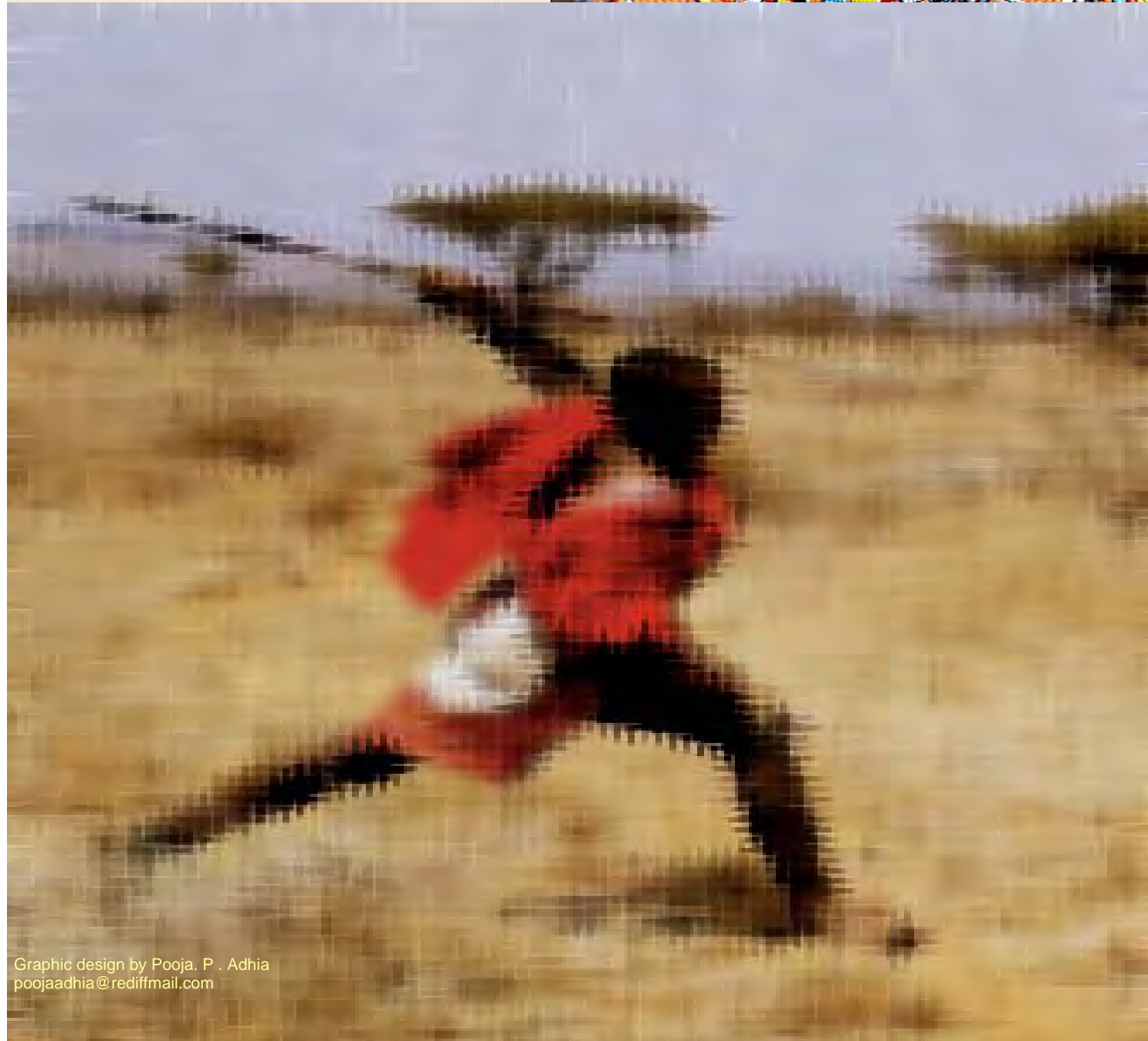


THE MAASAI



THE MAASAI WOMEN: CHILDHOOD TO WOMANHOOD

EMMANUEL PARSIMEI

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Childhood is a time of great freedom for the Maasai children until the age about seven. They have little to do in the family group except play, learn the ways of adults and build their language skills.

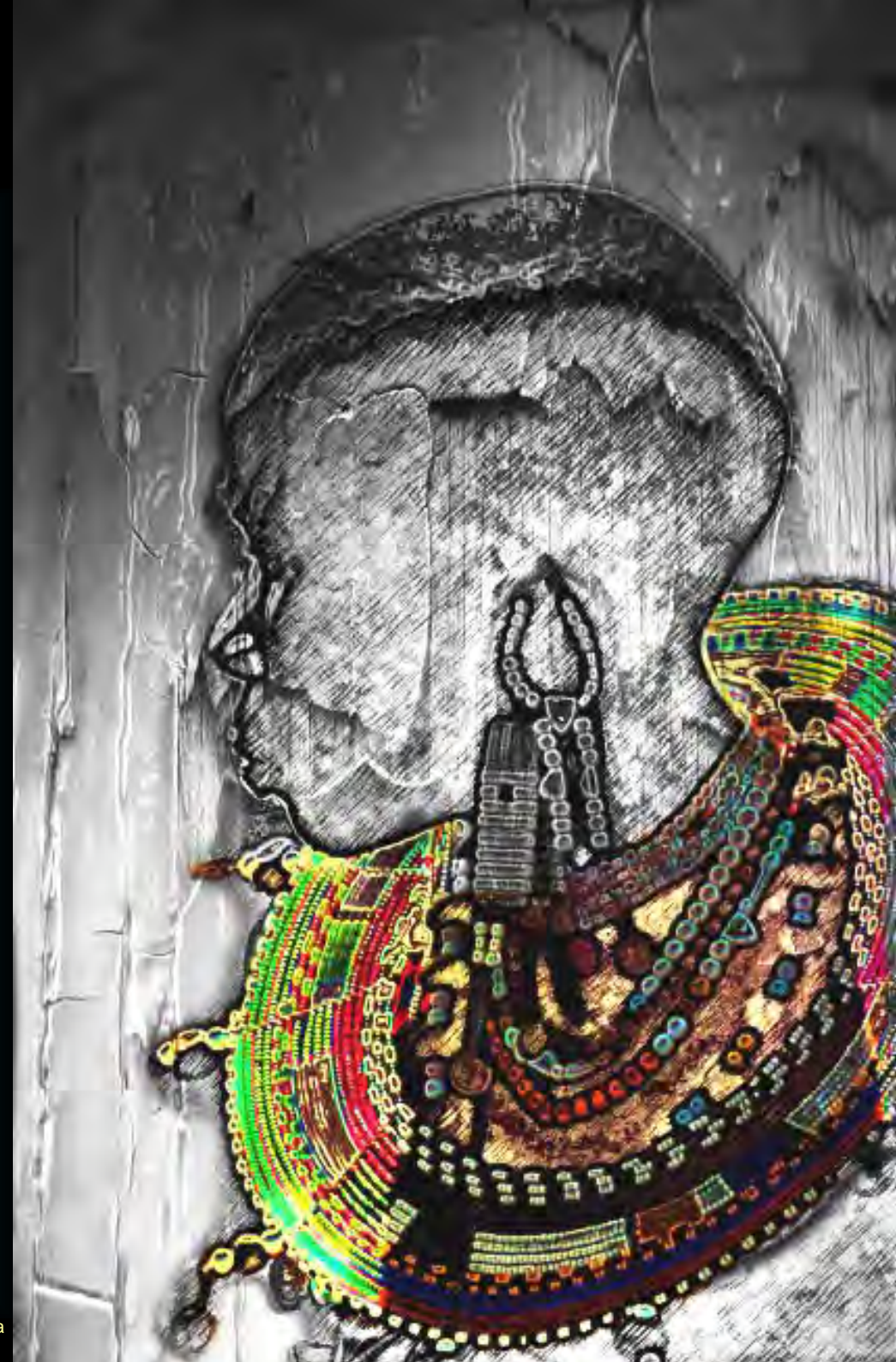
When the child is four or five years old, an experienced elder woman removes it's two lower incisors. Apart from enhancing beauty, this makes it possible to feed the child through the small opening should it get sick and not able to open its mouth. After the second set of teeth grows in, they are removed once again.

Girls gradually learn the womanly arts, for example, milking the animals, beadwork and various household chores. Self confidence in adulthood is built in these young years. Women have the duties to teach young girls good behaviour and help them develop responsible personal abilities and become morally upright. This is ideal in producing women of integrity in the community.

Respect is taught early in life in Maasailand. The child is taught to call all elders 'father' and all women 'mother'. After the first and the second naming ceremonies, a girl undergoes a rite called "Enkitupukunoto" which literally means cleansing in preparation for circumcision.

Between the age of seven and eight, the upper part of their right ear is pierced and, when that is healed, the left ear is also pierced in the same spot. In a year or two, a bigger hole is pierced in the lobe of the right ear and then in the left lobe. Wooden plugs or wads of leaves are inserted in the lobes to increase their sizes. The larger the earlobe, the more beautiful is a Maasai girl.

Girls are ready for circumcision when all childhood rites are passed and beauty is fully enhanced.



THE CULTURE AND THE WOMEN

Culture is one of the native heritages of the indigenous tribal people/groups. The Maasai community have maintained and practiced their culture over ages through generations. Culture has both positive and negative impacts on the lives of the people practicing it and is important through the instilling of discipline, respect and governance.

Some practices on the other hand, prevent effective development, transformation and introduction of new ideas. Women are subjected to gender discrimination, oppression and social torture and injustices through the practice of some outdated forms of culture.

Young girls are exposed to forced marriages, circumcision (female genital mutilation) and child labour which adversely affects them in their entire life. Women's reproductive health and sexual life is mostly affected by circumcision. This results in complications during birth and sometimes resulting in death in severe cases among Maasai women.

The culture has also resulted in a male dominated community. This has affected the women's freedom of expression, social and economical development. The male family head(s) and other male relatives have sometimes become oppressors and exploiters within the family. This has led to an inferiority complex in most women thus affecting their efforts and abilities in developing stable family backgrounds, in some cases.



C I R C U M C I S I O N

Emorata or circumcision (clitoridectomy) involves the removal of the clitoris and the labia minora. A specialist, who must be a woman, is brought in from the outside the family to perform the operation. She uses a specially made, curved and highly sharpened piece of metal. The really timid girls, who may try to get loose during the circumcision, are held down by the women present, if this fails, warriors will be summoned to help in holding them down. Initiation into adulthood, in the Maasai community is both a mental and physical process. A girl is believed to mature and able to endure the challenges of life with courage and dignity.

According to research, in the twelve Maasai sects distributed in both Kenya and Tanzania, about 99.5% of adult women have undergone female genital mutilation (circumcision). The practice is found to violate the right of life both physical and psychological being. The prevalence rate of the practice is still high both in rural and developed regions in Maasailand.

Girls are circumcised as soon as they reach puberty, or shortly thereafter. The ceremony is accompanied by a large feast involving the whole village. The bridegroom brings part of the bridal price thus officially opening negotiation for marriage. Unlike boys, girls do not have generation-grouping, and so their circumcision is individual depending on when their families decide to do them. If an uncircumcised girl becomes pregnant, she is circumcised immediately. Pregnancy before circumcision is an extreme embarrassment to the families. In the past, certain families would abandon a daughter to the mercy of hyenas and jackals if they found her pregnant before the rite.

The girl is married off immediately she heals from the operation. She starts building a family and acquiring wealth and security in form of children and cattle with her newly wedded husband. In older age, Maasai women oversee their children go through different rites which are a prerequisite to the Maasai culture.



CHALLENGES FOR A MAASAI WOMEN

Challenges for a Maasai woman start at an early age in life and continue throughout. They face social and economic discrimination and most of them suffer silently without any option. Maasai women are not independent to make decisions on their own and are always subjected to many duties in the family. They don't have any direct access to resources and thus have limited economic gain. They can't explore the developing world and discover their potentials. This has made them dormant, contributing to poverty.

School enrollment ratio of boys to girls is highly un-proportional due to the sense that girls will finally have to be married off to a different family. The number of school dropouts in girls is also higher than in boys. This has led to few women with professional skills than their male counterparts. Poverty among the Maasai is measured in terms of livestock and children. The inability to feed one's family is also a major poverty indicator. Women are found to suffer most in poor families trying to meet basic needs for their children.

Social economic improvement of women will enhance the disadvantaged image of the female gender in Maasailand. This can mainly be achieved by targeting and addressing the plight of the vulnerable women like widows and single mothers.

Land sales by some irresponsible heads, usually men, has rendered families destitute. Women and children are most affected by the negative effects of land sale.



RECOMMENDATION'S FOR INTERVENTION

1. Recognition of children's rights of both genders and particularly those with special needs, for example, children with disabilities.
2. Introduction and enforcement of national policies to restrain the practice of certain norms and traditions among the ethnic indigenous communities.
3. Entrepreneur training of women in groups and financial support to start small enterprises/initiatives/projects to improve their economic gain and thus alleviating poverty in households/families and the entire community.
4. The involvement of women in developmental activities and inclusion as members, officials and decision makers in community projects to reduce men's scepticism towards women's efforts in the society.
5. Representation of women in key decision and policy making systems in both community and national levels.
6. Protection of vulnerable individuals in the community and provision of proper education to enable creativity, self sustenance and innovation during adulthood.
7. The need to nullify customs, traditions, culture or other practices, which hinder the sound development of children such as early marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM), and forced child labour.
8. Facilitation of seminars and workshops to both genders to enhance family education to protect vulnerable individuals from debilitating leadership from family heads/husbands.
9. Policies should be developed to eliminate gender based discrimination and enhance the protection of the family.
10. Advocacy and lobbying for the right of women to own property to enable self sustenance.



*I'm just a girl child, it sounds good, but oh no!
To my father I'm just a source of income,
To my mother who bore me,
A beast of burden in the home,
To my fellow pupils especially boys,
A beautiful flower to be admired,
And to the old men, ooh a juicy fruit,
But to be eaten raw.*

*It all started before I was born
When my mother received a harsh warning,
Make sure you give birth to a boy,
Little attention was paid to me after all,
Girls like all women, are not to be noticed
by the society,
As I grew up I was always reminded,
would you please sit like a woman
Talk like a woman, what crime did
women commit,
To suffer all through their lives?*

*When it was time to go to school,
I rejoiced thinking that, this was the
end of suffering,
But to my great surprise I had been
mistaken,
Just like at home, girls in school do
donkeywork,
They fetch water and collect firewood,
smear or mop the floor, while boys are
learning,
Poor me who cares, I'm asking?*

*My mother makes me stay at
home,
While my brothers go to school,
To a girl's place is just but in the
kitchen,
Therefore one has to be trained
thoroughly,
Does she know I really hate this?*

*My parents want me to be
circumcised,
And I know it is wrong practice,
Circumcision removes all the
joy in my life,
My people help me,
For I'm only a girl child!*

*My father thinks of marrying
me off,
In order to get school fees
for my brother,
To him education for girls is
meaningless,
I have feelings for my
education dad,
Please let me complete my
education dad!
Does he care about my
feelings?*

*I have been assuming that,
Marriage is a bed of roses and honey,
But aah, to a Maasai woman,
It is like a small hell on Earth,
To her husband, a property to release his
frustrations,
And her in-laws a beast of burden,
Who cares? Maasai women want change!!!*



THE MAASAI CHILDREN, YOUTH AND THE ARTS

EMMANUEL PARSIMEI

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Arts in the Maasai Community involve a wide range of activities. The arts are practiced and expressed in various ways, for example, through songs, oral narratives, dirges, dressings, plays, artifacts, buildings, animal husbandry etc. These have resulted in the stability and well being of any given family. There is great development in family communication and expression of emotions.

The arts have been preserved and passed from one generation to the other through old women and men who have been an important tool for its conservation over the years.

During a tender age, children are soothed with songs and story telling, thus starting their artistic development at the early stages of life. Childhood gifts include finely made ornaments that express the love and care by their parents. All the teaching of the arts involves a major boost to the child's creativity and well being. Natural intelligence is thus given a chance to develop, uninterrupted by any external influence and finally resulting in a sound mind of the young person and eventually the adult.



THE VALUE OF ARTS IN CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Through the arts, children and youth recognize their individual talents and abilities. This leads to specialization once their capabilities are matured and developed. An expansive and diversified field of cultural knowledge is gained and lifetime interests are discovered.

Through enough motivation and practice in the arts, the basic natural knowledge is gathered by the young minds and utilized in creation of resourceful intelligence that is a foundation of a great society and community.

A great bond develops between the young and the old through the teaching of arts, the old thus pass on the important values and they have the important role as mentors and are considered extremely useful figures in the community.



THE SOCIAL ROLE OF ARTS TO THE MAASAI CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Arts help develop understanding how our ancestors thought, saw and how they portrayed their world.

The arts in the Maasai community have the principal role of instilling and maintaining discipline among children and youth. They are delicately taught on different aspects of their future adult responsibilities.

The roles are well done and easily transferred through an artistic format. Good and valuable morals are passed on developing a stable society and enhancing the social wellbeing of children and youth.

The complex Maasai culture is taught to the younger generation resulting in artistic and cultural forms and practices. This starts at a tender age and continues throughout their lives. Young boys gather stones representing cows, bulls and oxen and often drag them in and out of an enclosure representing the *enkang* (homestead) and this is finally practiced later in animal husbandry. Girls involve themselves in similar feminine games and art forms that clearly teach them their future roles and responsibilities

Adornment for beauty starts early among the Maasai female and male alike. This is practiced finely through indigenous modes of art. It includes decoration by ornament made through threading together of coloured beads for the making of beautiful artifacts. Ochre, a reddish mineral is ground and mixed with animal fat, this is then used to create artistic patterns on the face, arms and legs. This is usually done during ceremonies to express joy and togetherness in the community. This mode of art expresses a sense of belonging to the community as it is collectively done in functions in the passage or rites from childhood to adulthood.



CHALLENGES IN THE PRACTICE OF ART

The arts are one of the important aspects of the cultural heritage of indigenous communities. There is a great need for its conservation for future generations and most of the units are already extinct. There is a growing threat in indigenous art vandalism and exploitation through illegal trading which will not only accelerate its extinction but will also complicate efforts of documentation and conservation of this natural resource.

Through research, it is found that there is negligence in the practice of many important art forms in the community due to lack of facilities and technical know-how to improve the arts. Modernization is also responsible for the loss of the native arts which should be rigorously maintained and conserved.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous means of conservation and international heritage policies needs to be put in place to bring about effective conservation of the arts.

