

Anthropology 468: Disappearing World: Masai Women

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: In east Africa along the rift valley live the Masai. This film was made in the west and highlands in the rift valley near the Kenya/Tanzania border.

Masai Women

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: These Masai are animal herders. They despise hunting and they do not grow crops of any kind. Land is held uncommon and animals are the only form of wealth. And Masai love their cows, each animal has a name and the men compose long poetic poems in praise of their herds.

This is the village of an important man; a Lybon or profit. It is a large village because the Lybon is rich. He has many cattle, many sheep and goats and many women and children. The Masai conception of wealth is different from our own. Whereas a European tends to regard his wife and children as an expense, but Masai women and children are wealth within themselves.

Wealth involves rights over people as well as rights over things. And a man's riches may be measured by the size of his village which reflects not only the size of his herd but also his female dependents. It is a prosperous and leisured society and there is an abundance of natural resources.

The Lybon is especially rich. He has 12 wives, about 60 children and numerous daughters-in-law.

The Masai use everything produced by their animals. They eat their flesh and drink their milk. They make thongs and bed coverings from their skin and containers from their horns. It's a sign of prosperity to be able to smear the roof with pure cow dung rather than with a mixture of dung and mud.

A man needs a woman to build his house for him, to milk his cows and do the household chores. But a woman needs a man far more, because women can never have rights of ownership over any living animal. To survive they must attach themselves to some man with cows be it father, husband or son. This woman, Nolpeyaya, is the Lybon's 6th wife.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies-to Nolpeyaya]: What work do men do?

[Nolpeyaya]: There's nothing that men do. Nothing. You just milk for them and...they come and drink it in your house. At dawn, they see the cows off. Some men go herding...but once they have children, they just see the cows off and come home...because they have sons to herd for them. Men don't do anything.

As Masai men play a game:

[Male Masai]: One point to them.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: At about 30, a Masai man becomes an elder; a respectable citizen entitled to marry and live in the elders villages. They are the people who make the decisions about the herds and flocks. But before this men serve as warriors. After circumcision at about the age of 18, they belong to the army which in the past raided neighboring tribes for cattle and extended the boundaries of Masai land.

Warriors do not marry and they do not live in the elder's villages. They spend a lot of time in the forests and wandering about the country. When they do descent upon village it's the little girls who run the errands for them.

Girls themselves are circumcised in a ceremony which is the female equivalent of male circumcision. Until then, the girls belong as a group to the warriors. A girl leads rather a carefree life. She doesn't have much work to do, she's flattered by the attentions of handsome warriors and she has a secure home in her father's village. A girl's only anxiety as she gets older is that she should not get pregnant until she is formally initiated into maturity.

[Nolpeyaya]: A girl wants to hurry up and be circumcised. It's a very good thing...so long as she is not pregnant. When a girl grows up...she no longer wants to go near men because she doesn't want to get pregnant. She just goes and plays around with warriors...and then goes to sleep...in her mother's house.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: The circumcision ceremony begins as a private family affair. For the girl it is her farewell to childhood and also to her father's village because she will leave to be married soon afterwards. This girl is going to marry one of the Lybon's sons. The ceremony is expected to transform a giddy girl into a mature and thoughtful woman. Her head is shaved, she relinquishes her childhood name and she gives away her jewels to a younger sister. It marks the total shedding of her previous identity. After circumcision, she is considered fertile and entitled to become pregnant.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies-to Nolpeyaya]: Is the girl happy?

[Nolpeyaya]: Very happy. Part of the ritual is...to brew mead...from sugar and honey. Her father drinks and her mother drinks...they wear charms and they are happy...because their daughter isn't pregnant and they're drinking mead.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: After the circumcision has taken place the branches of a special tree are brought to mark the house where the girl is recovering.

[Masai Natives singing]: *Oh God, we pray to you. From all ends of the earth. I'm not angry with you...but give me a child. Then I'll slaughter an ox as the elders do.*

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: For the rest of the day people gather from all over the neighborhood to drink honey beer and to celebrate because the ceremony marks the emergence of an adult that will increase the fertility of the whole community. It's all a bit like a white wedding; an occasion for rejoicing, especially for the parents. They're

proud and happy to announce to the world that they have a daughter and that she has grown without mishap into a woman. The mother and father are smeared with red ochre. Later at the climax of the party the mother will anoint the clothes of the women guests with butter while the father puts on women's jewels and is blessed by the men. The father has already arranged his daughter's marriage with the son of his friend, the Lybon.

[Masai Native]: May the ceremony be fragrant. May you circumcise more children. Be happy guests and hosts. Live long enough to doddle in the cool shadows. Prosper. Prosper with your wives and with your children. Impregnate your wives. Circumcise your sons...and daughters. Look after things...in the hot lowlands...and in the cool hills.

[Nolpeyaya]: It's something God began long ago. Now your women are not circumcised. Hasn't that always been your custom?

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies-to Nolpeyaya]: Mm hmm.

[Nolpeyaya]: Well we also respect what we've always done since God first brought us into being.

[Masai Natives]: *Listen, God, to what suits women. It suits us to prepare charms for initiates-to be busy with our children's circumcisions-to have celebrations which are lavish...in honey-beer and milk and meat and butter. It suits us when our sons go herding. It suits us to sit resting in the shade. It suits us when we suckle children. God, Nursing Mother, Remember what suits us.*

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies-to Nolpeyaya]: After circumcision what happens?

[Nolpeyaya]: Nothing. She stays in bed...then she gets better and goes to her husband's village.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: A stranger is being brought to the Lybon's village; the new bride of one of the Lybon's sons. Her husband already has one wife, Maiyani who is waiting for her co-wife to arrive.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies-to Maiyani]: Maiyani – now that...your husband's bringing a new wife, do you mind?

[Maiyani]: No. We're not jealous...like you Europeans. If he brings even 20 more wives – that's fine. If we're jealous, we're beaten and sent back home.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: Isn't that hard?

[Maiyani]: No

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: European women would be jealous.

[Maiyani's friend]: To us a co-wife is something very good. Because there is so much work to do. When it rains the village gets mucky. And it's you who clears it out. It's you who looks after the cows. You do the milking and your husband may have very many cows that's a lot of work. You have to milk and smear the roof and see to the calves. If your children are small, they can't help.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: Can they?

[Maiyani's friend]: No. They're too silly. So when you give birth and it rains, who will smear the roof if you have no co-wife? No one. Who will clear the much from the village? No one. So Masai aren't jealous because of all this work.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: In Masai to be married means to be led. As soon as the women of the village see the husband and his companions they go out to greet them and to look for the bride who is trailing behind. Then they will descend upon her, screaming threats and insults to make her cry.

[Masai Natives]: Look! There's a thief coming! She'll bring shame on us. She must be a thief. Leave her alone – she cried all night. She didn't eat yesterday. What have you come here for? Hyenas will crunch your bones tonight. Look at her ugly teeth.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: All these women have been through this process. They too once left behind their mothers and everyone they were used to, to settle in this strange place. Marriages are arranged between and the bride knows neither her husband nor his village. The ritual dramatizes her helplessness and isolation. It requires her to express her anxieties in the midst of the women who are already established in the village. The very women on whom she will come to rely on for friendship and support.

[Masai Native Women]: Go on – cry! There's no one to help you.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: The person whose behavior is most ambivalent is Maiyani the co-wife. Maiyani has some of the worst threats but also seems to protect her co-wife.

[Maiyani]: Your husband's only got one cow and that's got rabies. Hurry up because we're ready to brand you. Let's see if she's greedy. Look at her navel. Oh, she is greedy. Stop crying now. We're really giving her a hard time. Your husband's got no cows – only pumpkins.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: Nolpeyaya approaches and the women pretend to the bride, that she is mad. They will try to protect her but they will probably be unable to do so.

[Masai Native Women]: Stop! Stop her! Come on, before she attacks again. Put the branding irons in the fire.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: Women marry young and men don't marry until they've been through warrior-hood. So the age difference between a husband and wife is

inevitably a large one. What matters to the bride is how he will turn out to treat her because unless he treats her with positive cruelty she will be unable to leave him.

[Masai Native Women]: Come on little sister, go inside.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies-to Nolpayeya]: Is a woman happy to be married?

[Nolpayeya]: Yes because at home...brothers mistreat you. You don't have your own cows to milk. But when you marry you build your own house and sit on your own bed.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies-to Nolpayeya]: And her husband?

[Nolpayeya]: He's happy to have a wife to bear him children and to create a village.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies-to Nolpayeya]: Does a woman mind if her husband is old?

[Nolpayeya]: Sometimes she minds, she won't go near him. So she is tied up and beaten. And her family says "You must marry that man". So you come to love him.

[Masai Natives]: *I pray to the sun which halves the sky. Don't mistreat the child I carry on my back...who keeps me company and whom I caress. I pray to the sky the plane of God. God, Nursing Mother, shade me. Make haste and give me a child. Rainclouds of God I beseech you.*

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: The next morning before Maiyani has let the cows out, the bride emerges from her mother-in-laws house where she has spent the night. She is already a bit more cheerful. She will not sleep with her husband for another four days as she is beginning to get used to his family.

[Mother-in-law-to bride]: Are these new? They seem a bit stiff.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: Her mother-in-law takes her across the village to meet the Lybon, the bride's father-in-law. To the Lybon, she is a new addition to the family who will increase the wealth and prestige to himself and his sons. A person who lives to see the circumcision of many grandchildren achieves a kind of immortality because his name will not be forgotten. When he dies, he is said to be merely sleeping and he will be buried. Unlike ordinary Masai, whose names will never again be mentioned and who will be left outside the village for the vultures and hyenas.

[Lybon]: May fevers avoid you. May God give you cows. May you have children.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: On her first morning in the village, the bride is introduced to the herd and given looking rights over some of her husband's cows. 9 of these should be perfect in shape and color.

[Masai Male]: Show her that brown heifer.

[Maiyani]: That little one?

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: This is an important transaction because the animals that she gets today will form the core of the herd her future sons will inherit and she will refer to them from now on as her own animals.

[Masai Male]: Show her that cow so that its calf can go home.

[Maiyani]: Has she been given that one?

[Masai Female]: No she's been given a small one instead.

[Maiyani]: How many is that? Where is the ninth?

[Masai Female]: None of the others are suitable. Leave it for now. We'll give you the ninth tomorrow. So go and beg for cow from other people.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: After being shown her husband's herd, she is expected to waylay anyone else she sees and to demand a present from them. Not surprisingly there are not many people around this particular morning.

[Bride]: Come and give me a cow, I haven't got any.

[Masai Male]: Yes you have. Have that elder instead!

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: Not one of the cows the bride obtains is hers to dispose of. And if her husband decides to sell or slaughter, there is nothing she can do about it. As Nolpeyaya put it once, 'No Masai women can ever say 'I shall sell a cow if I have a purpose in mind' she is only holding them in trust for her sons'. Marriage in Masai is more to do with the organizing of rights over animals than with friendship or affection. A woman doesn't choose her husband but she can and does choose a lover.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies-to Masai Females]: Are Masai men jealous.

[Masai Female]: Well now – a husband is jealous. If you take a warrior as a lover, your husband will beat you. If he finds out that is. But you steal away, over there – over there. So he won't see. Because you won't part with your lover. When your husband goes away, your lover comes during the night or he comes by day. Then he takes you to someone else's house so that your husband won't know.

[Masai Female singing]: *My lover has soft lines round his neck and a beautiful mouth. His hair is beautiful. I was sitting in my house one evening when some warriors came in from the forest. One of the warriors turned to me and asked, 'How did you come to love that warrior?' I just spat and I said 'Listen! He doesn't churn about in his sleep. He just lies straight not turning to the wall. And talks lovingly until the sun rises. My lover whom I chose for myself I remember the words we said to each other.*

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: Masai don't like the feeling of being alone so friendship is very important. One of the disadvantages about not owning animals is that women don't have much that they can give as presents to their friends. But women sometimes give away their own children to their mothers or childless co-wives and sisters. Nolpeyaya gave away a girl to one of the Lybon's daughters –in law whose baby died so that she will not have to sit alone in her house at night. A woman must bear children, especially sons because her sons will take over her herd when they are old enough. Otherwise when her husband dies the animals will be dispersed and she will lose her milking rights over them. She will become dependant on anyone who will look after an old lady with no means of support. She will no longer eat her own food as the Masai put it. The fortunes of women are almost wholly dependent on fate on whether or not they might actually produce children. So it's not surprising that their ideas of fertility have a religious significance. These ideas are summed up in a concept called 'enkishon'.

[Nolpayeya]: what is "enkishon"? The Masai language is very difficult to explain. But "enkishon" means to be favored with sons and daughters and thus become rich. So women ask God for "enkishon" so that her own children will look after her. As they grow up she can travel around to stay with them all. So that is why everyone asks God for "enkishon". It's good if you depend on your own child and not on someone else. Then you will not be eaten by poverty.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: After their own circumcision, women only participate in ceremonies through their children. The proudest moment for a mother is when she follows a warrior son to the most splendid of all Masai ceremonies "ayemoto". This ceremony marks a crucial transfer of dependence for her, because when her children grow up her husband will move in with his younger wives and she will go off to live with one of her sons. Ayemoto is the ceremony which ends warrior hood and transforms the young men into elders. After the ceremony they'll be settled down to marry and take charge of the animals to which their mothers have milking rights. The warriors from the Lybon's family are blessed to protect them from the evil eye of strangers they will meet at the ceremony. At the ceremony itself the mothers will be seen to have succeeded in life, they have beautiful children who have grown into men who will look after their cattle. For the mothers it is a magical and moving occasion.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies-to Masai Mothers]: Where are the warriors?

[Masai Mother]: They're at the river bank decorating themselves with chalk. They'll come back wearing lions' manes and ostrich feathers and do a war-dance. They wear bells and colored cloth, and they file into the village. Then they hand around and then get up and file around again. At dawn tomorrow they'll go again to the chalk banks. And they will all come back as zebras. You won't recognize any of them. Even a mother won't recognize her own son.

[Masai Natives singing]: *If you'd like to see a large herd, come to our village. Among the wild olives where the girls laugh and are happy because they see our warriors taking*

up arms. I no longer doubt my praises because the raiding parties set off from our village. I think they're coming. Look at them!

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: The women dust the warriors with milk when they enter the village. Warriors are expected to show their emotion in a form of chants.

Warriors march around village with their charms jingling and emotional chanting.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: The elders organize a mass blessing to mark the climax of the day's ceremony. The only people who are not happy at *ayemoto* are women with no children.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies-to Nolpayeya]: What does a childless woman do?

[Nolpayeya]: There's nothing she can do. A barren woman is something bad to the Masai. She looks after her husband's animals but when he dies she'll be mistreated by the sons of his other wives. They tell her to go away so they can take her cows and marry wives for themselves. She has no position in Masai society.

[Melissa Llewelyn-Davies]: But for those who have sons the ceremony is perfect. These dandified and sometimes callous young men are always respectful and loving towards their mothers. One of them has slaughtered a cow to feed the party from the Lybon's village.

In the two years I lived in the village, people showed very little curiosity about my own culture. But the one thing women asked me about was inheritance rules. Would I have equal rights with my brothers? Because a woman cannot own cattle the course of her life lies completely outside her own control. Women recognize the source of their vulnerability but they explain it away by means of a myth which lays the blame on women themselves.

[Masai Female]: Elephants used to carry things for women long ago. Buffaloes were our cows. Gazelles were our goats. Warthogs were our sheep. Zebras were our donkeys. Those were our animals. One day the women got up early to slaughter an animal. And every woman said, "My son won't go herding today. He'll stay to eat kidney." So the animals went off into the forest. They all became wild; gazelles, buffaloes, zebras – all went off on account of a kidney. Just a kidney. Because no child went herding. That is why we no longer own animals. Men all own these cows. We became men's servants. Because our cows went off on their own. We neglected the herd and so we became the servants of men. So we own nothing. All we have now is our gourds to milk into. That's the way it is.