

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Tribal First Aid

Safari, laivera
Masai District, Tanganyika
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
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New York 36, New York.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

I am deep in south Masailand now, in an area of semi-desert, range land of the cattle-keeping Masai, the tribe which is proving most resistant to foreign change or progress. This tribe, with its blanket draped men, skin clad women, with heavy ear-rings and beads for both sexes, is in this sense the very opposite of the Chagga. Where the Chagga welcome European change and innovation, the Masai, after decades of contact, retain their hides for women to wear, substitute only blankets for men and continue to prefer their traditional diet of blood and milk. A Masai moran, or warrior, is seldom without his long bladed stabbing spear, a weapon with a long bayonet blade, and a driving iron shaft, with only a foot-long wooden shaft connecting the two. (In ballistic terms this spear with its driving weight of metal would be described as having "high sectional density" to penetrate the vitals of a lion, the heavy metal length driving its soft iron blade around ribs and other bones.) The short wood shaft is light grained in the case of a young moran, dark (ebony) in the case of a senior moran, a symbol of another stubborn tribal conservatism - the retention of a fixed age-grade system, allotting duties and privileges in strict accordance with seniority and physical fitness.¹

A good deal has appeared in print regarding the Masai, dealing with them both academically and romantically. They appear to have moved down from the north, capturing whatever land they wished from the less war-like occupying tribes. They now number about 108,000 living in bomas or manyattas consisting of wattle, cow dung, and skin huts scattered over more than 34,000 square miles of land lying astride the Tanganyika-Kenya border recognized as theirs by the respective British administrations. They are the "sleek, black warriors of the steppes," described in so many adventure stories and novels, whose "thin boned, aristocratic, narrow nostriled" faces have been stylized by many artists. Many of them are, in fact, everything the most avid romanticists claim them to be, tall, gracefull with their male coiffeurs suggestive of a Grecian helmet - the natural artists' models of Africa.

Cattle are the life of the Masai, a man's wealth being based almost solely on the quantity possessed. They keep their cattle for the milk, for butter and occasional meat but also just to "look at." In the almost biblical scenes here at the Naberera wells, where the seasonal dryness has caused the cattle to be concentrated from hundreds of square miles around, the pride in animal possession is well demonstrated. The elders lean on their staffs, looking proudly on while the herds, in practiced drill, trot eagerly down

the ramps, to the water troughs forty feet down, for their once in two days drink. The young moran, forming a bucket ladder from the low water level up to the drinking trough, rhythmically heave the leather buckets up, the lowest man scooping up the water, the highest spilling it into the trough. So much energy, in the dry season sunlight, is not natural here. It has to be inspired by a special pride in property.

The government is having a hard time persuading the Masai that it might be wise to reduce their herds, by the innovation of selling, and obtain a better milk yield with fewer animals. With tribal kudos continuing to be so attached to plain quantity of cattle, the government fears a perpetuation of the overgrazing of available range, resultant erosion of the soil, and the present skin-and-bones quality of the cattle.

With the bringing of life-saving medicine and veterinary services to the Masai and the cattle, the natural processes of depopulation have been thwarted and the overgrazing, erosion, and water problems have become manifold. The local pax Britannica, too, has had a demographic and cattle-increase effect, preventing the Masai from killing one another off as in the great civil war of 1896. Tribal fighting and homicide are suppressed and greater freedom to roam and utilize every blade of grass has resulted. To break this chain of damaging factors is the major problem facing the government. I came down here to try to gain some knowledge of the details and dimensions of this task, or in other words to learn something of Masailand and the Masai.

Impressions have been pouring in, via eyes, ears and nostrils. The sunbaked land, sandy in this season, is spotted with cow dung which lies in dry balls rather than the patties of cattle who have enough to drink. The skinny, unenergetic cattle, fearfully torpid except when making their once-in-two-or-three-days trip to the wells. There are acres of flies on the backs of cattle, and in the faces of the people. They crowd in layers, yet almost unnoticed, on the eyelids of Masai children and adults, like the cattle at a trough. Another sight, particularly interesting to my wife, was of a Wanderobo (or native of the non-Masai hunting tribe) holding in his fist a warm, red kidney, fresh cut from an impala I had shot, biting and gulping at the still quivering tissue with gusto.

This trip will produce an essential sampling of pastoral East Africa to be written up later from my rather voluminous notes. For now I should like to relate some incidents of the trip as they occurred, starting with one of the experiences of this past week. The selection of the story of serious human injury may seem morbid. But to Western eyes, everything here is unusual. Also I have not yet become as intimate as I should like with Masai individuals, and at this stage the candid atmosphere produced at the scene of an accident might provide the best means of viewing these people as they are.

The accident took place several mornings ago, about 8:00, some two miles northwest of my tent camp at Ngasumet, west of Naberera. I first heard of it from a Masai runner, who came into my camp, said someone had been hurt,

and asked for medicine. I thought it the usual sort of plea for a white man's indulgence, and told him I was sorry, but I had no medicine for a broken leg. He should go to the native dispensary. It could provide first aid and then the hurt person could be taken to Mr. Anderson, a male nurse at the Naberera Lutheran mission thirty miles away.

Then I drove down towards the Ngasumet wells, intending to photograph the morning watering of the cattle. On the way past the dispensary which shares a small tin roof with the local chief's office, a man I recognized as one of the local chief's minions hailed me down, and the jumbe himself, who had been uncooperative and almost surly when I arrived several days before, came out and spoke in supplicative tones. A man was hurt, badly, some two miles back on the path to Naberera. His leg had been broken by a falling tree. Would I go and pick him up in my jeep?

I said yes, but it would be bad to carry the man in the jeep. He could not stretch out in the small body, and if they had a stretcher or the door from the office (a fracture net, I thought, could hardly be available here) it would be better to carry him back lying flat, using a four-man carry. They sulked at the suggestion, and I saw that if I did not bring the man back he possibly would not be cared for. I then advised them not to move him at all, but to bring the attention to the man, treating him on the spot and splinting the leg. They sulked more, and I said all right, but remember I bring him back on your say-so, against my advice.

The jumbe and two of his blanketed henchmen jumped into the back of my jeep, and he motioned for me to go. The medical dresser was not on the jeep at all, but was moving back to the rationing of medicine to a queue of women with babies. I told him to come along. Reluctantly he climbed in the jeep, bare handed, bringing no dressings and as I later learned failing to tell me of a board slab, lying ready inside the dispensary shack, which would have made a fair fracture litter. I drove speedily, with some danger to the springs, or the rough track, and in some two miles or so we arrived at a spot where a big tree, or rather a large rotten stump some three feet thick, had been freshly felled. In the shadow of its trunk, lying cold and in shock with no blanket or cloth, was a young moran, his left thigh gaping and bloody, with a hole two inches across where the splintered ends of his thin Masai thigh bone had rent their way out.

The blood was a bright, arterial red, but was not pulsating or even oozing now, being thickly clotted. If the big thigh artery, which I have seen bleed a man to death in minutes, had been tapped, it was no longer flowing dangerously. His skin was gray, but not as ashy as that of other negro fracture cases I have seen, and he was silent, lips moving a little and - like most really badly hurt men - his face was not wry, not even showing the lines that a bad stomach ache can produce. There was no expression of panic, no wide rolling eyes, only a bland sort of acceptance.

I backed the jeep closely to him and lowered the tailgate, demanding at the same time that they put a warm blanket over him. In turn the several

Masai looked at their blanket togas, the greatest possession, ranking with cattle, wives and spears, of the Masai, then down at the blood and at the coldness of the gray skin. I said again, impatiently, would they please put a blanket on him. After a two minute debate, the youngest of the chief's aides, probably an age grade brother of the stricken man, took off his blanket and laid it in the bottom of the jeep, to be folded over the man.

The aid man, during the lifting, did not touch the hurt man. He stood away, his clean shirt and creased shorts remaining unbloodied, and gave directions. The leg had been reasonably straight on the ground, but while they moved the man I had several times to hold the ankle to keep it from being bent at right angles (the sound of jagged bone against jagged bone grating audibly). When he was laid in the jeep, the broken leg extended outward onto the lowered tailgate, I saw that it was askew again, and picked up a piece of wood about four inches thick to hoist the ankle.

As I was driving away the Masai behind called me to stop, and told me I had forgotten my spare tire, which I had removed to make more space for the man. The spare tire was lifted into the car and my wife held it in the front.

During the lifting of the man, the loading, and the movement of the jeep out through the thick bush, avoiding the ant-bear holes, I was the only person who hurried or was in any surface way disturbed. The Masai seemed very deliberate and calm. The man himself did not cry out or even moan. When the leg was bent, even when the broken bones ground against one another, he would tighten his face a little, look upward, and chant in Masai, in a restrained voice, something metered and partly rhymed.

I had wanted to snap some pictures, and did, with vulturine feeling, at intervals during the lifting when there was nothing else I could do. I took only one or two, because of the superstitions of some Masai regarding photos, and also because of the tendency of all to halt and pose.

During the slow but bumpy ride back the man remained completely quiet - though entirely conscious all the way. He was taken inside the dispensary and laid on a large flat board, which should have been taken with us as a stretcher. I asked the dresser if he had sulfa, and found he had both -thiazole and -guanidine, told him to keep the man warm, to give him hot drink, and to give him the sulfa and have him drink plenty of water. When I saw the splints (of cloth-wrapped wooden boards) being prepared, I left and rode down to photograph the wells. When I came back some thirty minutes later the doors were sealed. An old woman, likely his mother, and a younger one were out weeping - genuinely and theatrically as well, I thought. In another half hour the doors were opened and he was brought out and placed on a cloth on the floor of a mud hut behind the dispensary. The dresser told me that he would have to be moved to Moshi, some 140 miles through desert in a bumpy lorry, that he would not be so likely to recover remaining here. The dresser answered my questions - that the man was now wrapped warmly, taking sulfa thiazole, drinking water, and I saw that the leg was lying flat. Casually, outside, an aid-assistant was scrubbing blood off the fracture-slab.

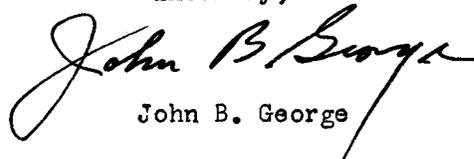
The school teacher, of the tiny Lutheran primary school across the way, thinks he will die. The dresser is doubtful. My wife, who has not seen much of this sort of thing before, doubts that he will live. My guess, and my even money bet, based on having seen a dozen similar cases, is that he will pull through, though his acrobatic layout leaps in tribal dances can hardly be so spectacular in future.

Dozens of ideas can be read into an observation of this sort. First, I suppose, would be the social and medical cliches about tribal stoicism, the cheapness of human life, and perhaps of the dissimilar pain-thresholds of civilized and savage man. A less philosophical point might be the very limited acceptance, on the part of the Masai, of the value of civilized medical aid and their persistent reliance upon the venerated tribal elders. The dresser had not even intended to go to the scene; the chief and two lay followers presumed themselves to be competent when in fact they did not even know that a fractured limb should not be bent. The ready leaning and dependence upon any available white man (the outcome of long years of guidance and supervision by white government officers) might also be broached. And so on.

As worthy as any of these, I think, is the notion of isolation and resultant self-sufficiency of the individual native here. During the dry season, when the herds are brought in from the temporarily watered range to crowd around the scattered points of permanent water, the land here assumes the character of a vast desert with few oases, or of an ocean with scattered small islands. The few trucks, plying weekly from oasis to oasis, are like the small inter island schooners I have seen in the South Pacific, and the native truck drivers are not unlike the skippers of such boats. They bring in the compact supplies - including the sulfa drugs, of course - and they frequently decide on life-and-death issues, like whether or not they can risk carrying, to a hospital two hundred miles away, a man dying of a gangrenous leg or perhaps of a disease communicable to his other passengers.

In such a land, the grim contract which nature imposes creates a type of man who merits admiration. He enjoys the freedom and independence which only vast distances and solitude can provide, and, whenever necessary, he pays the price with an objectivity that should shame his civilized fellows. When I drive back north, after the trip to the next water some 85 miles from here, I will find out whether the young Masai, who chants soft tribal poems while his bones splinter, will soon return to his boma or herds. If not, and if in tribal tradition his body has been laid out to be eaten by hyenas, my personal reaction will be the simple wish that I might die with a similar dignity.

Sincerely,



John B. George

1. H.A. Fosbrooke, one of the recognized authorities on the Masai, (in his article "An Administrative Survey of the Masai Social System" in Tanganyika Notes and Records, December 1948) partially condemns the age-grade system because the young men, formerly allotted primarily military responsibilities, now remain idle. He recommends that the period of warriorhood should be shortened allowing the men to graduate and become elders earlier in life. (From our observations here the moran do not remain completely idle. We have seen them sometimes tending herds and continually doing the very hard work of lifting water into the troughs at the wells.)

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